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THE LEADING WESTERN MAGAZINE

MARCH

WESTERN MAGAZINE

THE DOUBLE CIRCLE INVASION

HARD-HITTING COW-COUNTRY NOVEL

by WALT COBURN

CARMODY'S HOT-LEAD SALESMAN

GREAT GOLD-CAMP NOVELETTE

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APRIL ISSUE PUBLISHED FEBRUARY 28th!

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A Message from the Pioneers

WITH characteristic gloom, our friend settled back in his chair, took a cigarette and a drink. And then he was off.

"A hell of a world this turned out to be," he began. "Look at it. The people of over half the so-called civilized nations are engaged in the happy occupation of figuring new ways of killing each other. And do you know how many guys are out of work right here and now? There's no use for a gent to have brains or ability any more. . . ."

It always makes us a little sore to be exposed to another's troubles when we're sure we've cornered the market with our own. "Don't be too tough on the world," we said. "We've all got to fight a little harder; admit that conditions aren't the same for any of us, but be willing to meet those conditions as best we know how . . ."

"A lot you know about it," he gloomed. "All you do is to edit stories about a lot of dumb guys who chase cows, wear hair pants and shoot off guns. Cows grow easy; all you have to do is to feed 'em and water 'em and then rake in the dough when you sell 'em. A pretty soft life, if you ask me. . . ."

That made us mad, and we snapped back: "Why don't you shut up until you know what you're talking about? No; we've never been a rancher, but we know a few. And if you think it's a soft life, you've got another think coming. Cowmen have always had plenty of grief, which they couldn't run away from. They had to use not only fighting guts, but their brains and initiative. Listen—"

There was (we told him), that mysterious but epic trail-drive, the details of which are lost to historians of the cattle country, but which was typical of the old-time cattleman's daring in facing unknown odds. In a musty copy of a Department of Agriculture report for the year 1855, a newspaper item is quoted which remarks that a drive of a few hundred cattle passed through a Pennsylvania town from Texas—on their way to New York City!

Already, nine years before, however, a Texan named Edward Piper first headed 'em North to Ohio, where he sold his herd at a good profit

Yet that strange drive to New York City from the rolling plains of brush country of Texas somehow captures the imagination. It was probably the longest cattle trek on record, but who made it or how many got through is not known. The profit or loss on that daring project is not the point. It showed a vision and a boldness which was—and still is—a prerequisite to any kind of success—whether in the pioneer cattle industry, or in a more modern industrial and commercial world.

Charles Goodnight was another cowman who wasn't afraid to try the seemingly impossible when he joined up with Loving, to make his historic drive through hostile Comanche country to Horsehead Crossing. Previous to that drive, drovers and trail-crews had been forced to live off the country—and in dry weather, the suffering of both men, horses and cattle must have been severe. Cattle could fatten up at the end of the trail; but for those who had to "eat their peck of trail dust" in the drags, it was a hardship which made even the strongest sag in the saddle.

To a man of Goodnight's imagination, however, such a situation was a challenge, He built a huge wagon of Osage orange wood—a material that had been proved both light and strong by the Indians—and equipped it with water barrels. In it he also placed food and other articles needed on the drive. When a trail-crew must go without sleep for days on end, and at the same time maintain constant vigil

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against savage raiders, hot coffee becomes almost as important as six-shooters and rifles.

When the bottom dropped out of the Texas beef market, Captain Richard King, who founded one of the greatest ranches of all time, didn't sob into his beer. Hides, tallow and hoofs found a market, but there was still good beef going to the buzzards. King's invention of injecting salt brine into the carcasses of his beef didn't happen to work out commercially, but that didn't stop him from trying.

Another Texas cattleman, a few years later, however, improved on the idea and thereby founded one of the country's great fortunes. He was Gail Borden, who got the happy notion that there would be a market for "beef biscuit"—canned beef, probably dehydrated. He marketed it successfully in Galveston to the shipping trade.

They still tell the story of the herd boss in Northern Arizona who had gathered some two-thousand head at round-up, only to find that the river—which a day or so before had been a good watering place—was nothing but sunbaked sand. He got his trail-hands and sent them down to the stream-bed with part of the remuda.

"Look out for quicksand," he warned, then told them what to do to get water.

By driving the horses cautiously up and down the shifting, sinking sand, the hoofs of the herd started packing it. Soon water started seeping through. And before long there was enough not only for the thirsty horses, but also for the cattle. And twenty-four hours later there seemed no moisture in that country for miles!

Only a few years ago, a young Wyoming rancher who raised blooded horses and polo ponies found himself without a market. Horse-buyers simply weren't buying on the range. Even though the young ranchers' mounts were of a slightly better grade, the trick was to figure out some way to find a market—the same problem, it's interesting to note, that accounted, years before, for such roaring end-of-trail towns as Abeline, Dodge and the rest.

His neighbors laughed when this enterprising young man obtained a few trucks, fitted them to carry his horses from his ranch to the big Coast cities. "If you want horses and ponies like these, I'll furnish 'em—and the price will be right!" he told the prospective purchasers.

Selling horses like a drummer going around with his sample-cases was a new one on both customers and ranchers, but the idea worked! He made a good profit for that year—when other horse ranchers were bemoaning their fate and cursing "conditions."

"So you see," we told Jim, "the world may be cock-eyed, but tough times are nothing new. Somehow, someway, you and I have got to fight it out . . . If we show the same kind of courage and initiative as did those early cowmen, at least we'll have the fun of making a good, honest fight, instead of sitting down and sobbing!"

Jim looked up, and there was a sort of tight grin on his face I'd never seen there before. "Maybe those old-timers did know a thing or two," he said. "Guess I'll go out and see if I can't dope out some way to make myself useful. And maybe I'll get an idea—just like those old gents, who wouldn't be licked by things they couldn't help!"

Yes, we figure the epic story of the frontier West carries a message of manhood for all of us; an eternal inspiration to guide us through the darker moments of our own lives.

—THE EDITORS.

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The Double Circle Invasion

Epic Novel of Old Montana

By

Walt Coburn

It was ambush, and they had ridden straight into it. Their only bet was to shoot their way through. . . .

"I never heard of any Culbertson in this country, an' I never heard of any such hen-yard spread as the Double Circle!" the chalk-eyed stranger sneered at young Clay Culbertson. "I'm here, and if this range is claimed by that outfit, they better hunt another climate pronto, or argue it out over gun-sights!"

CHAPTER ONE

Hell-on-the-Hoof from Tascosa

CLAY CULBERTSON sat his horse on the scrub pine ridge and watched the big trail herd cross the Missouri River. He calculated that there must be better than three thousand head of cattle in the herd, and he had counted anyhow fifteen riders. A big herd and a full-sized crew of cowpunchers.

Clay watched them closely, because you

could learn things, like how to handle a big herd in treacherous water, just by keeping your eyes wide open and not missing little details. That was the sort of thing that old Till Culbertson was always drilling into him—to keep his eyes open and his mouth shut, miss no bets and learn from older hands.

Old Till hated a smart-Aleck kid, and young Clay's twenty-one years had been filled with hard-earned lessons. He called old Till and the other cowmen "sir," and right now he was picking up a lot of pointers from those cowhands down yonder.

It was a rare treat to see those cattle take the river, hit swimming water and then wade ashore on the north side, where a couple of riders scattered them out to graze along the wide stretch of bottomland where the 'breed hay crew had finished putting up wild hay.

Then Clay Culbertson remembered what had fetched him here, and the reality of what he was watching hit him like a kick in the belly. Unless this was one of those cowman tricks that old Till Culbertson sometimes played to learn him another lesson the hard way, those cattle had no damned business down there.

The Hawley place was one of old Till's best winter line camps. If the 'breed crew hadn't fenced those new haystacks, there would be hell to pay when those hungry cattle tore into 'em. It was up to young Clay to ride down yonder and find out why those cattle were there and who those cowpunchers were. If they had no right to be there, Clay had better see to it that they moved on and paid damages for any hay the cattle had eaten or tromped down.

The 'breeds, big Gregory Doney and his hay crew, weren't in sight. Old Till had sent Clay down here with the cash money to pay them off. And until Clay had sighted that trail herd crossing over, he had been anticipating the fun he'd have, because always when the haying was done there would be a fiddler and a jug and a big dance. Clay liked these laughter-loving 'breeds who were like overgrown kids when they "made a dance." And some of those 'breed girls were almighty pretty.

NOW, as Clay rode down the long ridge and neared the log buildings and pole corrals, it sure looked like this trail outfit were making themselves plenty welcome.

The remuda grazed below the barn and cattle sheds. The mess-wagon and bed-wagon were pulled up in front of the main cabin, and the cook had a supper fire going. Bedrolls lay scattered on the ground. The horse wrangler was throwing his cavvy together, heading them towards the pole corral for the outfit to catch their night horses. The cowpunchers on foot were gathered in a circle around a keg.

Clay heard a fiddle squeak, and he spotted Antoine Gladeau sitting on the seat of the bed wagon with his fiddle and a tin cup. Then he sighted big Gregory Doney and the others, all with tin cups. The women and girls in the cabin were poking their heads out the windows, jabbering and laughing. Small youngsters peeked from behind the skirts of their mothers and sisters. All were dressed in their Sunday best.

The cowpunchers were a hard looking lot. Mostly they wore beards. Their clothes were still wet from swimming the herd across the river. They were filling tin cups from the whiskey keg, and making remarks directed at the prettiest 'breed girls.

Clay saw Rose Marie Doney, eighteen and pretty as a calendar picture, start for a bucket of water. Then a young cowpuncher took her bucket in one hand, and his free arm went around her slim waist. He kissed her, and she jerked free, slapping him hard across his grinning mouth.

Big Gregory Doney laughed as he talked to a man as huge as himself. The man had a drooping gray-black mustache that dropped below the heavy stubble-whiskered line of his jaw. He waved his tin cup at the slim young cowpuncher who had tried to kiss Rose Marie. She had run back into the log cabin, leaving the young cowpuncher holding the big wooden bucket.

"If you was after that bucket and nothin' else, Tug, you shore got 'er. She's slipprier'n a Tascosa señorita, no?"

As Clay rode up, the big man turned to look at him. He was holding his cup of whiskey in one hand, his other hand hooked by a thumb in a sagging cartridge belt. Clay stared into the queerest pair of eyes he had ever seen.

The big man's right eye was opaque black. It stared a hole clear through Clay. But the man's left eye was milk white, and the bronzed socket around it was badly scarred. Clay wondered if the milk eye was blind.

"Well, young rooster!" the big man's voice was a husky growl, "Pull up the slack in your jaw. We're full-handed if you're huntin' a job. If you're ridin' the grub-line, light and rest your hull."

Clay found his voice. "I ain't huntin' ary job, sir. I'm Clay Culbertson. My old man owns this ranch. Unless you got orders from Till Culbertson to camp here with them cattle, I'm tellin' you to move on with your trail herd and pay for what damage your stock has done to our haystacks. You're trespassin' on Till Culbertson's Double Circle range."

For perhaps thirty seconds the big man stared at him. Then he gulped down his whiskey and let out a bellowing laugh.

"Hear that, men? We got orders to git to hell off this ranch! This bald-faced yearlin' says it belongs to some feller named Till Culbertson. He claims it's Double Circle Range. Ha! Any you boys ever hear of ary Till Culberson or his Double Circle iron? Nope. Never heard of the outfit, sonny. Now just swing that pony of yourn around and travel yonderly. Ride on back home and tell your old man that Chalk Eye Plunkett from Tascosa, Texas never heard of him or his hen-yard brand. Tell him that Chalk Plunkett taken a likin' to this part of Montana Territory. That me and my Tascosa outfit is locatin' here."

Clay felt the inside of his belly shrink into a hard knot. He knew that his face looked white and scared and that his voice sounded weak and puny. The big chalk-eyed man was grinning, but his black eye glittered like a red coal.

Gregory looked uneasy. Antoine had quit fiddling and there was a silly grin on his moon face. The hard looking cowpunchers were grininng like they enjoyed the show.

"This is Till Culbertson's ranch." Clay tried to make his voice hard and steady. "You and your outfit's got no right here. I'm stayin' till—"

"You, Tug!" Chalk Plunkett motioned to the beardless young cowpuncher who had taken the 'breed girl's bucket, "Git on your horse. Double your wet rope and whup this young rooster outa sight."

The young cowpuncher grinned. He had stringy black hair and black eyes and a long, lantern-jawed face. Yellow buck teeth showed when he grinned. He dropped the bucket and grabbing his saddle horn with both hands, vaulted into the saddle without using the left stirrup. He jerked his rope strap, shook a loop in his catch-rope that was wet from crossing the river, and spurred his horse towards Clay, swinging his loop down against his chaps to flatten it.

CLAY whirled his horse as the doubled rope swished across his back and shoulders. He grabbed the rope, crowded his horse against the young Texan's, dallied the doubled rope around his saddle horn and jumped his horse off at a sharp angle.

The end of the young Texan's rope was fastened to his saddle horn with a tie-loop and Clay's horse pulled the slack taut with a jerk. The young Texan's horse, taking the force broadside and off balance, was jerked off its feet. The Texan was thrown heavily.

Clay let go the rope and spurred his horse back. He quit his saddle with a leap that landed him on top of the young Texan. They rolled on the ground in a tangle of flailing arms and kicking legs. The Texan's horse scrambled to its feet and trotted off.

"By Gar!" bellowed big Gregory Doney, "Dat Clay, she's de wil' cat!"

Clay heard it and smashed a short hard right into the other cowboy's nose. Blood spurted. A jolting blow caught Clay in the eye. A hand grabbed his thick hair, and it felt as if his scalp was ripped loose.

He rolled over on his back and grabbed the young Texan's throat, smashing at the bloody face until that torturing grip on his hair slacked. A thumb gouged at his eye and he grunted with pain. Kicking free, he scrambled to his feet and staggered backward until somebody gave him a hard shove that sent him stumbling forward.

The young Texan came up off the ground crouching, the four-inch blade of a clasp knife flashing from his hand.

"Rip 'is damn' guts out, Tug!" roared Chalk Plunkett.

Clay had a white man's fear of a knife, but right now there was no time to get scared. The knife ripped his sleeve from shoulder to elbow as he caught his balance and rushed, fists swinging. The heavy blade bit again as he closed in, grabbing desperately now at the wrist above the red dripping steel. They dangled in another clinch, and the knife was raking at his back, ripping his buckskin jacket and the shirt beneath.

Clay grabbed the Texan's wrist and hung on. He got his other hand free and now both his hands were clamped down on the knife-hand and wrist. The young Texan's teeth sank into his shoulder and clamped there like the jaws of a bulldog.

Clay jerked a knee into the young Texan's belly. Then he yanked and twisted at the Texan's arm until the knife came loose. His fists pounded into the Texan's face until the teeth let go. Hard fists rained short stabbing blows into his face. He grabbed the Texan's throat in both hands and choked him until his tongue popped out and his eyes rolled white. His face was a sickly gray.

Heavy hands jerked Clay off his man, flinging him against the rear wheel of the bed wagon. His head hit the iron wagon tire, and dimly he saw the big man throw a bucket of water on the cowpuncher he called Tug. Then Chalk Plunkett, his whiskered face black with fury, kicked the young Texan to his feet and shoved a gun into his hand.

Clay, dizzy and sick with pain, his eyes half blinded by blood, dirt and sweat, grabbed the wagon spokes and pulled himself to his feet. He clawed for his six-shooter, but the gun had slipped from its holster during the fight.

He saw the gleam of Tug's yellow buck teeth; saw him thumb back the hammer of the long-barreled six-shooter.

Then a man on a big roan horse rode in between them.

The gun in Tug's hand exploded as the man on horseback knocked it out of his hand. The heavy lead slug tore up dirt at Clay's feet, ricocheting off with a snarling whine.

THE man on the roan horse had a six-shooter in his hand, and there was a thin-lipped grin on his freshly shaved face. His black mustache was carefully trimmed; he wore a red flannel shirt and a new hat. His spurs and bridle bit were silver mounted. Pointed tapaderos covered the stirrups of his stamped saddle. He was a range dude, but he looked like he could make a fast hand anywhere. Water dripped from his clothes and his horse was still wet from the river.

His steel-gray eyes under heavy black brows flicked Clay with a quick glance, then went on to the big man.

"Can't that whelp of yours win a scrap without your backin', Chalk? He had twenty-five pounds, six inches of reach and a toad-sticker by way of odds in his favor, but the tow-headed boy trimmed him. Then you kick the tow-head's gun under the wagon, hand Tug a six-shooter and tell him to do himself a little murder job. Perhaps that's your idea of makin' a man out of him. . . ."

He turned to Clay. "Your gun's under the bed wagon, tow-head. Get it. If you want to shoot it out with Tug Plunkett I'll see you get an even break."

Clay crawled under the wagon and picked up his six-shooter, wiping off the dirt.

"One of these times, Dude," said Chalk Plunkett, "you'll horn into somethin' and make a losin'. Fork that horse of yourn, Tug. Git the hell on out to the herd and stay there. I'm ashamed to claim yuh. Git outa my sight!"

Clay's nose was bleeding and blood oozed from his knife cuts. His aching eyes felt as if they were full of hot sand. He stood on spread legs that felt none too steady, his gun in his hand. He kept watching Tug Plunkett as the battered young Texan picked his gun up out of the dirt.

He was ready to shoot if Tug tried to get in a sneak shot at him. But Tug Plunkett had had enough fighting. He got on his horse and rode off towards the river.

"Go h'in de cabeen," said big Gregory Doney. "De h'ol woman, he'll fix you h'up, Clay."

"You get them haystacks fenced, Gregory?" asked Clay.

The habit of obeying Old Till's orders

was too strongly embedded in his cowpuncher brain to let anything make him forget why he had come here.

Big Gregory nodded. Clay shoved a bruised, grimy blood-spattered hand into his pocket where he had put the roll of money. The pocket was empty. The money must have fallen out on the ground during the fight. His stinging eyes searched the ground.

"I had the money to pay you off . . . musta lost it here." He kicked the loose dirt with his boot.

"If you dropped any money around here," said the man on the roan horse, "don't expect to find it. Somebody's beaten you to it. Finders keepers. That's the motto of this Tascosa outfit, tow-head. Mark it down to profit and loss."

But big Gregory Doney had other ideas concerning his hay money. Till Culbertson was a tight-fisted man concerning such matters. He had given Clay the money to pay off the hay crew. He was not putting out twice. And Gregory had his crew to pay off.

Gregory stood a few inches over six feet in his moccasins. He was all big bone and hard muscle. Whiskey always made big Gregory willing to take his own part anywhere.

HE TOOK two long strides, grabbed a whiskered cowpuncher by the collar of his shirt. When the man reached for his gun, Gregory's open-handed blow was like the slap of a grizzly. Gregory shoved his hand in the cowpuncher's chaps pocket and pulled out a roll of money held together by a wide rubber band. He let go the man and grinned.

The cowpuncher, dizzy from the hard slap along the jaw, reached again for his gun. The man on the roan horse shook his head.

"Come easy, go quick, Slim. Tuck in your shirt-tail. Get out on her with Tug."

"Are you ramroddin' this outfit, mister?" asked Clay.

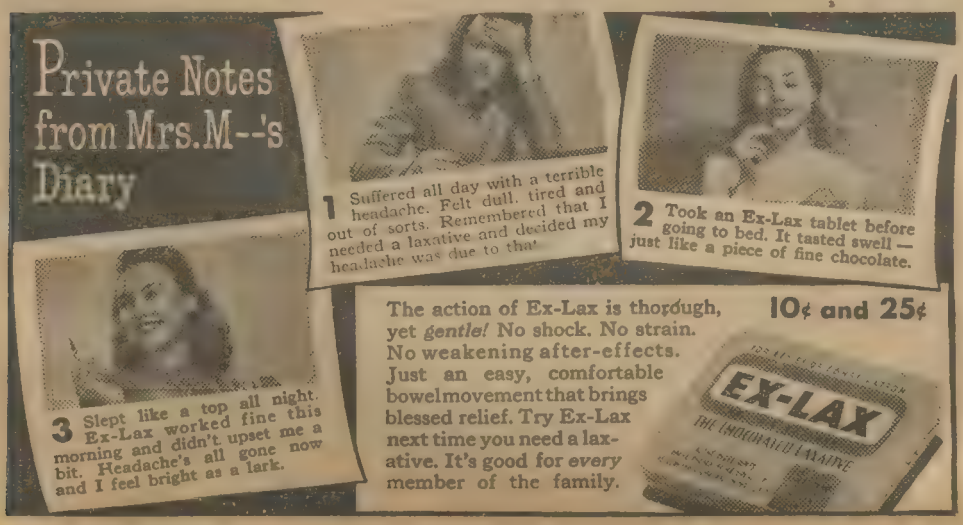
"Chalk Plunkett's the ramrod. Better get patched up. You're bleedin' like a stuck hog. And when you're in shape to travel, hit the trail. Your luck's about played out."

Marie Doney and her mother bathed and bandaged Clay's knife wounds. Gregory was telling Antoine and the other 'breeds to hook up their teams and get their women in the wagons that were already loaded. There would be no big dance tonight.

The 'breeds welcomed but few white men at their dances. White men always tried to take their women away. That meant fights. These Texans were a tough outfit. Gregory had his hay money and he wanted to keep it.

Chalk Plunkett growled a protest. The man he had called Dude silenced him.

"If you aim to locate here, Chalk, stay


Private Notes from Mrs. M--'s Diary
1 Suffered all day with a terrible headache. Felt dull, tired and out of sorts. Remembered that I needed a laxative and decided my headache was due to that.
2 Took an Ex-Lax tablet before going to bed. It tasted swell — just like a piece of fine chocolate.
3 Slept like a top all night. Ex-Lax worked fine this morning and didn't upset me a bit. Headache's all gone now and I feel bright as a lark.
The action of Ex-Lax is thorough, yet gentle! No shock. No strain. No weakening after-effects. Just an easy, comfortable bowel movement that brings blessed relief. Try Ex-Lax next time you need a laxative. It's good for every member of the family.
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out of trouble with these 'breeds. Let 'em pull out. We're strangers in a strange land. Walk easy. You wore out your welcome at Tascosa. Profit by your past mistakes. These 'breeds live along the river. They can be good neighbors. Handle 'em wrong and they'll whittle on your cattle. Let 'em go."

Clay rode away alone. As he rode through the scattered cattle he read a dozen different brands on less than a couple of hundred head of longhorned cattle. None of the brands were vented, but all the cattle wore the same road brand—an X on the left side of the rump.

IT WAS dusk when Clay Culbertson rode back up the scrub pine ridge and through the badlands to the head of the breaks. And it was almost daylight when he reached the Double Circle ranch at the foot of the Little Rockies.

Till Culbertson, a tall, rawboned, soft-spoken man, was at the corral with four cowpunchers. Breakfast was over and they were catching their horses. The cowman eyed the youngster who was his foster son and bore his name.

"Where's the pelt?" he asked.

"Pelt?"

"Pelt of the mountain lion you tangled with. You're a sight. Don't tell me you let them 'breeds run you off from their dance?"

The Double Circle cowpunchers were eying Clay and grinning. Clay's battered face spread in a grimace that was meant for a grin.

"There's about three thousand head of Texas cattle turned loose on the Hawley place, Till," he said flatly. "Fifteen-twenty men. The ramrod's a big feller with one white eye—name of Chalk-Eye Plunkett. There's a fancy dressed cowhand called Dude that's got somethin' to do with the outfit. They're from Tascosa, Texas.

"I tried to put 'em off, but they run me off instead. The hay's put up and fenced and Gregory's paid off. That Texas trail herd's in a dozen or more different brands and none of the brands vented. I got a list of the brands. This Chalk Plunkett said he'd never heard of Till Culbertson or the Double Circle. He said he's locatin' there at the Hawley place. They're actin' like they owned it."

"How many men did you kill, Clay?" a voice mocked.

The speaker was a young cowpuncher about Clay's age. He had reddish hair and a skin that always looked sunburned and his eyes were green. His nose was thin, his mouth thin, and his lower jaw was long and angular. This was Till Culbertson's son Roy.

"I lost count after my gun went empty and I had to club 'em," said Clay, swinging to the ground and jerking at his latigo strap.

"Come on to the house, Clay," said Till Culbertson, "when you've ketched a fresh horse. The rest of you men git saddled and wait. You, too, Roy."

"I'm goin' to Landusky, Till," said Roy, his green eyes sullen.

"You're not goin' nowheres. Cool your heels."

Till Culbertson mounted and rode the hundred yards from the corral to the big log house. His face looked gray and lined. An inner worry darkened his steel gray eyes.

He was pouring himself a stiff drink of whiskey when Clay went into the big front room. Clay had never seen his foster father take a drink until just before supper or after sundown.

"Sit down, Clay," he said quietly, "and tell me about this Tascosa outfit. What brands did you read on them cattle? What does this Chalk Plunkett and the Dude feller look like? Tell me all about it, unless you're too tuckered out. What in hell did they do to you, anyhow?"

Till Culbertson filled a glass with whiskey and told Clay to drink it down. Ordinarily he was dead against Clay or his son Roy drinking. There had been an older son Bob, the pride of Till Culbertson's cowman heart, who years ago, had been shot to death in a drunken saloon quarrel.

"I had a scrap with Tug Plunkett. His old man ribbed it. He pulled a knife. That's how I got cut. Then his old man give him a gun. I'd lost mine. Tug Plunkett was goin' to gut-shoot me but the Dude feller knocked his gun out of his hand. . . .

"Here's the list of brands. There's more than that if a man had time to work the herd. Stands to reason if you find a dozen different irons amongst not more than

two hundred head of cattle, there's more brands amongst the rest, so I don't think it's a pool herd. Chalk Plunkett and the Dude feller might own it. The others are just common cow-hands, workin' for wages. They all pack saddle guns and they're hard lookin'."

"They got a right to look tough," said Till Culbertson, "if they come from Tascosa."

CHAPTER TWO

Stray-Dog Cowpuncher

TILL CULBERTSON kept walking back and forth across the room, now and then firing questions at Clay. How many men had Chalk Plunkett in his outfit? Was there any other men in the outfit named Plunkett? Did those cattle all look like Texas longhorns? Did this Dude feller have a nick in one of his ears? Questions like that. . . . And Clay answered as best he could.

Clay was dead tired, half sick from pain, and he hadn't eaten since yesterday morning before daybreak. But he sat up straight in his chair and let the slug of whiskey warm the inside of his empty belly.

Roy rode up to the house and came up on the porch. He opened the front door and would have come into the room but Till whirled on him and told him to get the hell out. Roy's face got red and he glared at Clay before he banged the door shut.

Clay saw Roy fork his horse and ride off at a lope, headed along the road to Landusky. But apparently Till Culbertson was too worried to pay any attention to Roy. He even seemed to forget that Clay was still there in the big front room; that he was bunged up and needed some grub and rest.

Till Culbertson filled his black corncob pipe and forgot to light it. He chewed the heavy stem and his hard blue eyes stared bleakly out the window without seeing anything. He stood there for a long time, staring out across the country, his back to Clay, big fists knotted.

Then he turned back to the cluttered table that served as a desk, and picked up Clay's tally book with the list of brands Clay had read on some of the trail herd cattle. His big forefinger stabbing at each brand he called off.

"Bartlett's Bradded B, from near Waco. Slaughter's Long S. Here's the LFD and XIT irons. The Casket brand from off in Jeff Davis County. This Lazy D is from the South Concho below San Angelo. The Kettle brand is plumb down on the lower Nueces. Here's two irons from up in Fannin County.

"You ketch on good, Clay. That's no pool herd. Big outfits like the XIT and Slaughter don't pool with nobody when they go up the trail unless it's mebby one-two irons that's friends and neighbors. These irons is a scatterment layout from half of Texas and both sides of the Pecos—the Hash Knife and Turkey Track. Big outfits.

Till Culbertson absently tamped down the tobacco in his still unlighted corncob. "Looks like Plunkett and his Tascosa renegades played no favor-ites when the whittled on the trail herds that come up the Goodnight and Loving Trail or the Bacon and Potter Trail. They lopped off fifty-a-hundred head from different trail herds. Drove the cattle off and held 'em beyond Tascosa till they'd built a herd of their own. Burned Plunkett's X road iron on 'em and headed north. Trail outfits can't lose time layin' over to ride after a few head of cattle that's bin lost in a stampede or cut out of the herd of a dark night by some renegade in cahoots with them Tascosa rustlers. That's how Chalk Plunkett built up his herd and dumped 'em there on the Hawley place. An' he's fetched the Culbertson and Plunkett feud up from Tascosa with them cattle. Cold-trailed me here, by God, after twenty years. Once I run, on account of the Lady and you two boys. But I'm done runnin' now."

Till Culbertson was thinking out loud, talking to himself. Then he noticed how white and drawn Clay looked, and the twinkle in his eye belied the growl in his deep chested voice.

"Hit the hay, son. You look peaked as hell. I'll put your horse in the barn. The Chink will patch you up and feed you. He's better'n most doctors. Git to your room and into the blankets. You done your damndest; no man kin do more."

And that was as close to any praise that the old cowman ever dealt out.

CLAY managed a grin as he went to his room in the big log house. There he and Roy shared a single room.

The Chink was the Chinese cook. His name was Ah Ling, but the cowpunchers called him Ah Hell. He cooked a good ranch meal and his herb poultices could draw the pain and fever out of a knife cut or bullet wound. He smoked queer smelling tobacco, rolled in thin funnel-shaped newspaper that he cut into rectangles with scissors.

During his spare hours he worked along the creek with pick and shovel and gold pan. Whenever he got to town he would locate a poker game. Ah Hell played a stiff brand of poker. Nobody knew how much money the long-queued Ah Hell had planted somewhere on the Double Circle ranch. Ah Hell had run a poker game in his cabin, until Till Culbertson put a stop to gambling and whiskey on the ranch.

Some drunken placer miners, years ago, had been about to hang the Chinaman when Till Culberston rode up and stopped the lynching. He had taken the Chinaman to the ranch and Ah Hell had stayed on as ranch cook. Ah Hell probably had enough money, dust and nuggets cached away to keep him in luxury the rest of his life. He was staying here out of some sort of Celestial loyalty to the big cowman who had saved his life.

Ah Hell made Clay get into a big wooden troughlike tub of hot water. Then he cleansed and poulticed the knife wounds. In a little while the throbbing pain left his body and he ate a hearty meal and dropped off into a dream filled slumber.

The sound of voices woke him just as it was getting dark outside. He had slept all day. He could hear the sound of men's voices in the front room as he pulled on his clothes.

First came a flat-toned voice that sounded familiar but at that moment Clay could not quite place it.

"That's my proposition, Culbertson. It's cash money on the barrel head. Take it or leave it."

"I'm leavin' it," Old Till growled. "The Double Circle outfit ain't for sale—not at your road-agent price. Or at any other price. Take that word back to Chalk Plunkett."

"I told you I'm not reppin' for Plunkett. I'm dealin' my own game, Culbertson."

"Then you're double-crossin' Plunkett?"

"I don't like that term. I claim no friendship for Chalk Plunkett. Plunkett would shoot me in the back tonight if he got the chance. I'm playing my own game, Culbertson."

Clay placed that cold, flat-toned voice now. It belonged to the man called Dude.

"I'm not havin' any part of it," Till Culbertson rumbled. "I want no truck with you, mister. And I'll pass along a little hunk of advice that you'll be wise to foller: "Last year the cowmen of Montana Territory organized the Stock-growers Association. We aim to make it almighty tough on cattle rustlers and horse thieves. You and Plunkett are apt to git hamstrung."

There was still that mocking note in Dude's voice. "You won't call on your Stock-growers Association to pick up your old Texican feud with the Plunkett outfit, Culbertson." It was a flat statement; not a question.

IN THE heavy silence following that remark Clay heard the tinkle of a bottle neck against a glass edge.

"I kin set back," sounded Till Culbertson's voice, "and let the blizzards take care of Chalk Plunkett's stolen herd. Winter will hit in a month or so. Them Texas cattle got here too late to git 'climated. There ain't enough hay on the Hawley place to feed a third of 'em through the winter.

"Them cattle won't rustle like native steers. They won't paw down through the Montana drifts to the feed. They'll hump up with their rumps to the blizzard and die. It ain't noways possible to winter three thousand head of cattle down yonder. All I got to do is set back till the chinook wind in the spring cuts the drift, then tally out Plunkett's stolen trail herd by the dead carcasses piled up in the coulees and draws. This winter will whup Chalk Plunkett."

Old Till Culbertson snorted. "Not if he drifts his longhorns out of the brakes

and spreads 'em out across your Double Circle range. You've got other hay camps. Plunkett and his Tascosa cowhands are invadin' your Double Circle range like locusts. Your only chance is to fight. And accordin' to all reports you haven't got a belly for fightin'. You let the Plunkett outfit run you out of Texas. Chalk Plunkett aims to keep you on the run. I'm offering you ten thousand dollars—"

"You'd better swaller your likker and git out, mister." Till Culbertson's voice was a little too quiet. "Git, while you're able to walk outa this house on your purty laigs. I quit Texas for a reason, but that reason ain't holdin' my gun-hand now. I'm done runnin'.

"Mebbyso you're right about my not callin' on the Stock Growers Association to back my play. I had a medicine talk with my cowhands this mornin'. They're no pack of gun-totin' killers—there ain't what you might call a real curly wolf amongst them boys. But I'll match 'em ag'in Chalk Plunkett's Tascosa bush-whackin' rustlers. I aim to kill Chalk Plunkett when I cut his trail. And if you git in my way—"

Clay heard Till Culbertson's words die away. He heard Dude's flat-toned voice, low-pitched and deadly.

"Your cowpunchers aren't back yet. Your son Roy is drunk in town. If this gun happened to go off, Culbertson, and a lead slug hit you where it would do the most good, I'd see to it that Chalk Plunkett got blamed for the killin'. Write out a bill of sale for your Double Circle outfit and I'll lay ten thousand dollars cash on the line. . . ."

Clay did not pull on his boots. He slipped through the hallway to the door of the front room. As he thumbed back the hammer of the six-shooter, the click sounded loud in the tense silence. Dude's back was towards him. The door hid Clay.

"Drop your gun, you Dude!" Clay's voice none too steady. "Shall I kill him, sir?"

As Dude turned, Till Culbertson's six-shooter slid into sight. The cowman's voice crackled like a whip-popper.

"Drop it, Dude or by God—"

The range dude dropped his ivory-handled gun. It clattered to the scrubbed pine board floor with a loud sound. The color drained from his too-handsome face. Then he smiled thinly, his eyes glinting in the lamplight.

"Smart son you've got, Culbertson. Pick up the marbles, Clay. You play a neat game."

CLAY came from behind the partly open door, his sock feet making no sound, his cocked six-shooter in his hand. His battered face was white.

Each month, *Dime Western*—"The World's Leading Western Magazine"—features a story by Walt Coburn, who was raised on the cattle-range and knows and loves both the country and the people whose dramatic stories he brings you. Next issue is on sale February 28th!

"Clay makes a hand anywhere a man puts him," said Till Culbertson. "He tells me you saved his life down at the Hawley place. That's the only reason I'm lettin' you ride away from here alive. Pick up your fancy gun and git. The next time it fills your hand I'm goin' to make you use it. Clear out, Diamond."

The range dude picked up his ivory-handled gun and shoved it into the carved Mexican holster.

"Adios, Culbertson. So-long, Clay. You'll do to take along."

There was an arrogant swagger in his gait and his silver-mounted spurs tinkled mockingly as he let himself swiftly out the door.

Till Culbertson kicked the door shut and blew out the lighted lamp. From the darkened window they watched the man called Dude ride away in the moonlight toward Landusky.

Till Culbertson pulled the window shade back into place and told Clay to light the lamp. Clay used a glove to keep the hot lamp chimney from burning his fingers.

There was a faint grin on the tall cowman's rugged face as he poured out two small drinks. The eyes under his shaggy brows held a twinkle that belied the stern-lined visage.

"That feller," he said, "is a gamblin' man named Dude Diamond. I seen him win a matched ropin' for big money back at Tascosa. He's a killer that don't make a habit of losin' his gun like he did just now. I'm obliged to you, Clay. A little drink won't do neither of us any harm. Here's how."

Then he corked the bottle and put it away. The sparkle was gone from his eyes. "How much drinkin' and gamblin' has Roy bin doin' on the sly, Clay?" he asked quietly.

"I—I reckon you'd better take that up with Roy, sir."

Till Culbertson scowled, then nodded. "I aim to. I wasn't askin' you to be squealin' on him behind his back. But it's sorta serious, because right now I'm in a kind of a tight. I wouldn't want Roy to be playin' into their hands. Mebbyso I've bin handlin' you two boys wrong—ridin' you with a spade bit. Givin' you hell about drinkin' and gamblin' and hellin' around town. Mebbe that keeps you from comin' to me for advice or for help. . . . If *you* get into a tight.

"Take my oldest boy Bob. I give Bob his head. Let him run wild. Figgered he was doin' what they call sowin' his wild oats. That was down in Texas. I'd bin a wild 'un when I was young, so I figgered he'd outgrow his hell-raisin'. Like as not he would have, but he got shot. It like to killed his mother. It was a gut-shot fer me. And it started a ruckus that wound up by my leavin' Texas. Right then I swore I'd not let you and Roy lay yourselves open to what happened to Bob. . . .

FOR a moment the old cowman was silent. Then he continued: "I bin hearin' things. I know that you and Roy has bin into a little trouble here and there. That kinda news travels fast and grows bigger as it travels. I know you and Roy had a ruckus over one of Gregory Doney's girls. That Injun whiskey had somethin' to do with it, and the fight come off at a 'breed dance. A tinhorn gambler tried to collect a hundred dollars Roy owned him on a gamblin' debt. And I know that you rode your horse into Pike Landusky's saloon a time or two when you had a few shots of forty-rod under your belt. And I know that before you two boys fell out over that 'breed girl you bucked your horses down the street at Landusky and emptied your guns at the moon.

"I never let on I'd found out. But it kinda fretted me. And now there's trouble a-comin' up and I'm askin' you boys to shake hands and bury your war clubs. You bin raised together. You, Clay, are like my own son. When I die you and Roy git this outfit as equal pardners. And right now you and Roy owe it to me to quit this damned foolishness and tend to business.

"A drink of good likker never hurt no white man. A little hell raisin' does you good. But till we git shut of Plunkett and his Tascosa outfit you boys has got to make hands. I'm tellin' you now. And I'm tellin' Roy when he gits back to the ranch tonight. You're both good boys. I want you to stick together like brothers, regardless. . . . Now git along to the barn, Clay, and tend to your chores."

That was a long speech for Till Culbertson, and it meant that the big cowman was almighty worried.

Clay got his boots and hat and went to the barn. Nobody but a stove-up old cowpuncher Uncle Ben, whose hard riding days were over, was there. Uncle Ben was the barn man. He had been a grown man when Till Culbertson was a boy. And he had come up the trail with Till Culbertson and his wife and young Roy and Clay when the two boys were hardly big enough to ride their horses.

Uncle Ben had a snowy white beard and hid a lot of his real feelings inside a rheumatic cranky shell.

"Where's the boys, Uncle Ben?" Clay asked as he headed for the ladder that led up to the hayloft.

"Roundin' up the horses. Beef work starts in a week-ten days. They're gatherin' the cavvy and fetchin' 'em in from the horse camp. Hell, you know that. What you wastin' time askin' me fer?"

Clay grinned faintly. He noticed that Uncle Ben had buckled on a cartridge belt and his old wooden-handled six-shooter was in a holster instead of in the waistband of his faded overalls. And a carbine leaned against the side of the harness room. Looked like Uncle Ben was expecting trouble.

Clay tried to make his question sound

casual. "What was the ruckus down in Texas between Till and the Plunkett outfit?"

"Git the hell up in that loft and throw down some hay into them mangers!" Uncle Ben's voice creaked like a rusty hinge. "You kin ask more questions than a Philadelphia lawyer. . . . Hold on, you! got messed up with 'em at the Hawley place. Was there a mule-faced feller with red hair amongst 'em? He'd be gray by now, mebby? Green eyes?"

"He might have bin back fetchin' up the drags. There was some I didn't see. Six or eight riders that hadn't come to camp. Why?"

"*'Why? Why?*" Why, hell! Git that hay down. I'm short-handed. Barn full of horses. Stalls to bed down. Pilin' ten men's work on a man. And you stand there a-bawlin' 'Why!' "

Clay climbed up into the loft. He heard Uncle Ben cussing and muttering down below.

UNCLE BEN knew the answers to all the questions that had bothered Clay since that day, ten years ago, when he found out by accident that Till Culbertson was not his real father. Or that the soft-spoken, Bible-reading, little white-haired woman Till always called the Lady was not his mother.

He and Roy had always called him Till and said sir to him. They had called her Lady, and Till had treated him as he treated Roy. The Lady had always mothered him as she did her own son Roy. Only sometimes she would take his face in her two delicate white hands and look into his eyes and shake her head slowly from side to side, a troubled doubt in her deep green eyes.

The Lady had lived in a world all her own up until she died. Some terrible shock, some heart-tearing grief had turned her thick coppery hair snow white and had left her mind a blank. She spent her days sewing or reading her Bible. Sometimes at night Roy and Clay would hear her moaning and weeping. Then Till would be there, comforting her as best he could until what he called one of her bad spells was over. Sometimes it would be dawn when she was finally asleep, and Till would come out of the bedroom looking like a man who had been through hell. His face gray and his eyes deep sunken and haggard.

And finally one morning about ten years ago Till Culbertson had walked out of the room, stumbling like a drunken man, his face as gray as old lead. He told the boys that the Lady was dead. That she had dropped off to sleep after one of her spells and would never wake up again.

After the funeral Clay had happened upon her Bible. He had turned back the worn leather cover. On the fly leaf that bore the records of births and deaths, right below the name Robert Culbertson and the date of his death, was the name Clay. After it, in Till's bold handwriting the word "Adopted," that seared the boy's eyes and burned a brand on his young heart.

It had been a tough blow on a ten year old kid, coming, as it had, right on top of the Lady's death. And those kid hurts are almighty tragic.

He had read the other names in the Bible—dates of birth and death, like Bob's death recorded. And opposite Clay's name, the date of his adoption—the same date as Bob's death.

Clay figured there was some connection with Bob's killing and his adoption. It struck him then as being connected, and he had somehow gotten the idea that he was like some stray dog that was being taken care of out of pity.

The small boy had kept his hurt to himself. He had brooded over it, lying awake of a night long after Roy was asleep. Covertly, he had watched Till Culbertson and figured that he detected a difference between the cowman's way of treating his own son and his faster-son. And when young Clay had thus tortured himself for a couple of weeks, he had slipped out of the house one night, saddled his pony and pulled out.

Till Culbertson had caught up with him at the Cross P ranch, over on the Shonkin range.

He had left a painfully scrawled and tear spotted note behind for Till and the cowman had it with him. There had been no whipping or scolding. Till had never laid a hand in anger on his boys. But his lectures carried a lesson.

"You ain't a stray dog, Clay," Till had

quoted from the letter. "I taken you and I'm raisin' you as my own son. When you're old enough to savvy about such things I'll tell you all about it. Your father was a brave man, the gamest man I ever knowed. Your mother died when you was too young to remember. Your daddy got killed in a gun-fight. You're like my own son, just the same as Roy. Don't never git no other idee, son. Don't never try to run off no more. When you come of age and kin rustle for yourself you kin pull out if you've a mind to. But till then you're my son. Your name is Clay Culbertson."

TILL had taken the boy on to Fort Benton and had bought him his first pair of copper-toed, red-topped boots. And there had been all the candy Clay could eat.

Roy and Clay had always celebrated their birthdays together. And now Clay knew that was because Till Culbertson didn't know the month and day, perhaps didn't even know the year of Clay's birth. And he had never told Clay the name of his real father.

Clay had never asked what his father's name had been. There was something about Till Culbertson's manner that forbade any such questions.

Clay had been quite a hero at the Double Circle ranch when Till fetched him back.

"Milner was keepin' him there at the P Cross ranch," Clay overheard Till telling Uncle Ben, "Had him jinglin' horses. . . . Plumb acrost the Missouri River and over on the Shonkin. Traveled close to a hundred miles. He's a driftin' chip off the hardwood block, Ben."

Now Clay Culbertson was past twenty-one and he knew no more about his parentage than he had that night ten years ago when he ran away from the Double Circle ranch because he figured he was a stray dog. It was time Till was telling him something about it, but the habit of asking no questions was too strongly embedded in Clay now to broach the subject.

Clay shoveled hay down from the loft to the mangers below and came back down the ladder. Uncle Ben had finished bedding the stalls and watering the ten head of horses stabled there.

Clay looked at the horses, then at Uncle Ben and the carbine the crippled old cowpuncher had cradled in the crook of his arm.

"Lookin' for bear, Uncle Ben?"

"Wolves," snapped the crotchetey old cowhand, spitting tobacco juice at a fly on the barn floor. "Curly wolves. They prowl of a night. Dammed if you ain't shore chockfull of fool questions!"

"We're keepin' a barn full of night horses tied up?"

"They ain't sheep that's tied in the stalls. Better wrop a row hunk of beef on that black eye of yourn. Till says you got whittled on. What does the other rooster look like?" There was a twinkle in Uncle Ben's puckered eyes.

"I look for him to die, Uncle Ben," said Clay solemnly.

"The hell!" Uncle Ben showed mild surprise. "You up and shot 'im?"

"He bit a hunk outa my shoulders. If he swallowed it he'll die of cannibal poison."

Uncle Ben snorted, chuckled and spat again. The old cowpuncher liked Clay better than he did Roy. Roy got bossy at times. Uncle Ben squatted on his boot heels and acted like he might be about to say something. But the Double Circle cowpunchers came riding in and Uncle Ben told them to turn their horses into the lower pasture and go on to supper which was waiting.

"You throwed the remuda into the big pasture?" he asked the cowpuncher. Uncle Ben liked to pretend that he ramrodded the outfit and gave orders.

"What there was of 'em, old timer. There's twenty odd head of horses missin'. Them two overgrowed 'breed boys at the horse camp got holt of a jug somewheres last night. They was bleary-eyed and bedded down when he reached the horse camp this mornin'. Till's goin' to have big fits and little 'uns."

The Double Circle cowpuncher pulled his saddle from a sweat marked horse. He grinned mirthlessly at the old barn man. "Mebbyso you'd like to break the bad news to Till."

"I'll take it first hand. What's the bad news?"

Till Culbertson had come around the corner of the big log barn. The cow-

puncher repeated what he had told Uncle Ben. Till cussed softly.

"Git your suppers, boys. Where's Roy?"

"Ain't seen him since he pulled out this mornin', Till. He never showed up at the horse camp. I reckon he rode to town."

"Eat some supper, Clay," said Till Culbertson, "then saddle your horse and ride to Landusky. Fetch Roy home."

CHAPTER THREE

Brand of Cain

IT WAS a job that Clay had no stomach for. Roy would be drunk and ugly. Since that fight they'd had over Rose Marie Doney at the 'breed dance a few months ago, the bad feeling between the two young cowpunchers had been strained to the breaking point.

Rot-gut whiskey had caused the fight. Roy, half drunk and quarrelsome, had gotten on the prod when Rose Marie refused to ride home from the dance with him about daybreak. Roy had been sober when he took her to the dance. But Rose Marie had a dislike for drunken cowpunchers.

Rose Marie was tall and slim and had a sprinkling of freckles across her small nose. She had brown eyes, and there were coppery high-lights to her thick black hair. She had something of big Gregory's disposition — good-natured, quick-laughing, but with a mind of her own. There was nothing of the cowlike squaw docility about Rose Marie when her temper was rubbed the wrong way.

"Clay's taking me home," she had told Roy. And the way she had taken hold of Clay's arm and looked up at him had turned Roy's anger on his foster-brother.

"Clay," he had sneered, "won't be in shape to take himself home when I git done workin' him over. Step out behind the shed, you tow-headed stray. You bin a-beggin' for it a long time."

Roy made a mistake when he called Clay a stray. Otherwise Clay would have just rolled his drunken foster-brother in the creek and sobered him up. But that word stray had hit Clay below the belt. When he finished beating Roy into hollering "enough," he had taken Rose Marie Doney home.

You glide through whiskers like a breeze—
And find new comfort, speed and ease
With Thin Gillettes, priced four for ten;
They rate sky-high with thrifty men!
Top quality at rock-bottom price
Gillette
4 for 10¢

Since then the two boys had avoided one another, and Roy had promised to give Clay a whipping that would last him a lifetime.

Now Till had sent him to Landusky to fetch Roy back to the ranch. Clay knew that Roy was going to put up a nasty fight. It wasn't a job that Clay relished. But when Till gave a man orders, he took 'em.

Roy's saddled horse stood at the long hitchrack in front of Pike Landusky's saloon. Clay left his horse alongside Roy's and went in. Some miners and two or three strange cowpunchers stood at the bar. Pike was serving drinks and rolling the dice with his customers.

Clay spotted Roy sitting in a poker game at a far corner table. Roy's back was towards the door and he was too engrossed in the poker game to take notice of Clay's entrance. But the man who was banking the game sat facing the door, his back to the wall.

That dealer was Dude Diamond. He looked up, saw Clay, smiled thinly and went on dealing.

Roy Culbertson's hat was tilted back on his thick reddish hair. He mopped sweat from his forehead and poured himself a drink from the bottle at his elbow.

"How's about another five hundred, mister?" Roy's voice was dry. "The Double Circle's good for it."

"And plenty more, I reckon," smiled Dude Diamond. "Make out an I.O.U. and sign it. The sky's the limit, I don't like to take any man's paper, but I'm making an exception tonight in your case. Make it out to Dude Diamond."

ROY turned his head. His face was flushed and there was a glassy look to his eyes. "Fetch us a pen and ink, Pike. And—" He stopped short, his glassy stare suddenly fixed on Clay.

Clay stood between the bar and the poker game, halted uncertainly, held by the faint smile on Dude Diamond's face.

Roy Culbertson kicked back his chair, gripping the edge of the green cloth-covered table as he got to his feet. Then he let go the table. Turning, he faced Clay, a snarl twisting his lips, his cheeks gone chalky white with red blotches mottling his skin.

His hand dropped to the butt of his six-shooter.

"You damned sneakin' lyin', coyotin' stray—"

Clay charged like a bull as Roy jerked his gun. There was a roar and the flash of burning powder stung Clay's face.

He ducked, butting Roy in the belly and wrapping his arms around Roy's. They struck the table with a jarring crash that upset it, spilling cards, stacks of poker chips, glasses and the bottle. Men quit their chairs, cussing as they grabbed at their chips and backed away from the fight.

Dude Diamond was on his feet with catlike swiftness, shoving banknotes and gold coins into his pockets. He stepped back against the wall, his faint, thin-lipped smile unchanged, steel gray eyes watching the fighters as they rolled over on the floor.

Roy was too drunk to put up much of a fight. Clay grabbed the barrel of the smoking gun, twisted it from Roy's hand, smashed Roy alongside the head with it, and scrambled to his feet with the gun in his hand as Roy went limp.

Roy Culbertson lay sprawled on his back, his mouth open, his eyes shut. The gunsight had cut a gash across his temple in front of his ear. Blood oozed from it.

"It looks," said Dude Diamond flatly, "like you've killed your high-rollin' brother."

Pike Landusky came from behind the bar with a wet bar towel. He had little friendship for Till Culbertson. If Till's boys killed one another, why, that was all right with him. But if the killing happened in his saloon Till Culbertson was going to raise hell.

Clay's eyes stung as if they were full of hot needles. His face was powder-burned. Roy's bullet had nicked his hat crown.

He stared down into Roy's face and his belly tightened into a knot. He was breathing like a spent runner, gripping Roy's gun.

He thought of Till, and of Till's oldest son Bob who had been killed in a whiskey fight. And he wondered if he would have the courage to ride back to the Double Circle ranch with Roy's dead body and face Till Culbertson.

"By gar, she's de bad hell of a theeng!"

Big Gregory Doney shouldered his way through the crowd. His big hand gripped Clay's shoulder, then let go. Then the big half-breed grabbed the towel from Pike Landusky's hand and he knelt beside Roy's motionless form. He wiped away the trickle of blood and pulled open the front of Roy's shirt, tearing the buttons off. He pressed his ear against Roy's chest, listening for heart beats. Then he lifted his head, gathered Roy Culbertson's limp form in his arms and stalked swiftly out the door on his big moccasined feet.

"She's mabby dead, dat Roy. Come h'on, Clay. I got de wageen h'outside."

BIG GREGORY DONEY lifted Roy's bulk into his wagon, laying him on a pile of soogans and a red Hudson's Bay blanket. He climbed into the wagon and told his squaw to turn the team around and head for the Double Circle ranch. He called to Clay to fetch Roy's horse.

Clay mounted his horse and led Roy's. Following the wagon down the street and down the road out of town. The Little Rockies threw dark shadows into the gulch and across the little mining and cowtown of Landusky.

A couple of miles from town the wagon halted where the road crossed the creek. Big Gregory dipped water from the creek with a bucket.

Clay felt sick inside and he was shivering like a man taken with a bad chill. He got off his horse and stood gripping the end-gate of the wagon, watching big Gregory's shadowy movements.

"Drive h'on to de ranch, h'ol woman," said Gregory. "Dat Roy she h'aint dead yet. But mebbyso she'll die purty soon, by gar!"

Clay followed the wagon, leading Roy's horse. The wagon rattled. Now and then the iron tires hit a rock and tiny sparks flew out. Big Gregory had pillowed Roy's head on a folded soogan.

Clay rode alongside the moving wagon and said something about going back to town and fetching the doctor. But Gregory said the doctor was dead drunk. And Clay knew that Ah Hell was a better hand than the whiskey-soaked Landusky medico.

Clay tried to remember bits of the Bible he had learned from listening to the lady read aloud in her soft voice. But the words got all jumbled up, and he had to ask God in his own words to not let Roy die.

That fifteen-mile stretch of mountain road to the Double Circle ranch seemed a million miles long. When they got there, and Clay saw a sliver of light behind the front room window blinds, his heart seemed to crawl up into his throat and lodge there like a huge dry lump.

He tried to call out as he swung off his horse and mounted the two steps to the porch but no sound came. It was big Gregory Doney, carrying Roy's unconscious form as he'd carry a sleeping child, who called out to Till Culbertson to open the door.

Till yanked open the front door and held the lighted lamp. He bellowed for Ah Hell to come a-runnin'. They carried Roy into the room the two boys had always shared and big Gregory eased Roy down onto the blankets. Roy moaned and moved his bandaged head from side to side. His bloodshot green eyes opened and he looked square at Clay and then at his father without any sign of recognition. His stiff lips moved. His voice was a croaking whisper.

"Clay done it!"

Then he was muttering unintelligibly. And Clay found himself looking into the hard, pain-seared blue eyes of Till Culbertson. Till looked old and whipped. There was a grayish pallor shadowing his face.

"I done it, sir. Hit 'im over the head with a gun."

The Chinaman came in as Gregory was pulling Roy's boots off. Till Culbertson's voice sounded heavy and weary.

"Put up the horses. Then set in the front room. I don't want to hear no more now."

Till Culbertson's eyes had turned bleak. Clay felt like a murderer condemned to death by his own father.

GREGORY followed him out and told his squaw to drive to the barn. Then the big half-breed sat down on the porch steps and lit his willow stemmed Hudson's Bay pipe.

Uncle Ben lit the barn lantern and

tucked in his shirt tail. His hard, bright-puckered eyes studied Clay.

"I had a scrap with Roy. He tried to shoot me. I hit him over the head with his own gun. I reckon Roy's dyin'."

Uncle Ben took his arm and pulled him into the harness room. He pulled a jug from behind a stack of pack saddles and harness. Pulled the cork and shoved the jug at Clay.

"Take a big slug, Clay. You look like you was dead on your laigs. If you killed that red-headed, green-eyed hellion he had 'er a-comin'. Quit feelin' sorry fer him. Come a showdown I'll tell Till Culbertson a few things. And I'll make that Chink talk, if I have to drag him all over the ranch by his Chinee pigtail."

"What's Ah Hell got to do with Roy?"

"That," said Uncle Ben, "is what I'm shore aimin' to find out. There's bin somethin' goin' on between that Chinee and Roy and it ain't on the level. I got a way of makin' that heathen talk. He's got enough money hid out to buy and sell this outfit. Then why is he cookin' here for forty a month? That pigtailed heathen is the slickest poker player that ever riffled a deck. He's panned gold along this crick. He hits the pipe, and I ain't talkin' about tobaccer.

"I read in a book about them Chinee tongs and hatchet men. There's Chinee gun-toters in San Francisco that don't miss. Ah Hell owns a pearl-handled six-shooter. He gits opium in them packages from San Francisco. It ain't all Chinee nuts and candy in 'em. . . .

"Them Chinee figger they can't git to their heathen happy huntin' groun's if you cut off their damn pigtail. They can't git back to China without a pigtail. I read it in them books about *The Pinkerton Boys in Chinatown. The Pinkerton Boys and the Hatchet Men* is another 'un. . . ."

Old Uncle Ben was hopelessly side-tracked now. The paper-backed novels that dealt with the Pinkerton Boys were the old cowhand's library of literary gems. He felt towards Chinamen as some Texans, remembering their Alamo, hate all Mexicans. Till was always keeping Uncle Ben from running Ah Hell off the ranch. Whenever the old barn man got on a drunk, Ah Hell hid out.

Gregory's squaw unhooked her pinto team and tied them to the rear of the wagon, throwing some hay into the wagon box.

Clay walked slowly back to the house to wait for Till in the front room.

CHAPTER FOUR

Badlands Outcast

TILL CULBERTSON had watched big Gregory Doney carry his son Roy into the house. Roy had accused Clay, and Clay had said he'd hit Roy over the head with a gun. The cowman had connected the big half-breed and his pretty daughter Rose Marie with the fight. Roy stank of whiskey. Clay was cold sober. A sober man has no right to kill a drunken man. The fight had been over a 'breed girl. So thought Till Culbertson.

Ah Hell had worked over the unconscious cowpuncher, muttering to himself. His fingertips feeling for a skull fracture. He listened to Roy's pulse and breathing and nodded to himself. Then shook his head. He shuffled back to his cabin on thick, felt-soled Chinese slippers. He mixed some herb concoction and fetched it back and got it down Roy's throat. Then he ordered Till from the room and sat down beside the bed.

Till Culbertson was feeling the effects of more whiskey than he had drunk in years. The liquor, combined with worry and grief was warping his thoughts, distorting his reasoning powers. He took another drink and stalked out onto the porch to get fresh air. The sight of big Gregory Doney sitting there on the top step snapped his taut nerves.

"You and your fiddlin' and Injun likker and that girl of yourn have raised enough hell. Hit the trail! Git the hell outa my sight! If that boy of mine dies, I'll kill yuh! Clear out!"

Big Gregory Doney got to his feet, a look of blank astonishment on his face. Then he turned and walked off without a word, just as Clay came from the barn. And Clay caught the brunt of the cowman's cold fury.

Till Culbertson stood there on the porch, the lighted doorway behind him. His big hands were clenched and his face was like an ugly granite mask.

"I sent you to fetch Roy home. You'd give me your word that you and Roy would quit this damned janglin' over a two-bit 'breed girl. You was sober and Roy was drunk. You had no call to whup him over the head with a gun. If Roy lives it won't be no thanks to you. Right when I need the both of you, this happens. You got to whup him over the head with a gun on account of a damned little 'breed wench.

"You're so damned stuck on them 'breeds, go on and throw in with 'em. Go on back to the squaw camp. Swill their rot-gut booze. Dance the Red River jig to a drunk 'breed fiddler's tune. . . ."

Clay stood there and took it, spread-legged and white-lipped. He was stunned by the ferocity of the cowman's unwarranted attack.

Ah Hell appeared in the lighted doorway. He said something to Till and the cowman turned and went back into the house, slamming the door vigorously behind him.

"By gar," said big Gregory, "She's dronk, dat Till. Mabby loco. She's don't know what she's talkin' 'bout, by gar. I'm think you better come h'on with h'ol Gregory, Clay. Bimeby she'll be sober, dat Till."

Clay nodded. His eyes were dulled with a deep sickening pain that made his heart feel like a lump of cold lead inside his ribs.

UNCLE BEN stood there in the dark shadows of the big log barn, the echo of Till's heavy voice still in his ears. He gripped Clay's shoulder in a gnarled hand.

"Saddle a fresh horse, Clay, and drag it. It's bin a good many years since I seen Till go off half-cocked thataway. He ain't hisself. I don't want him makin' no more bad mistakes tonight. You go along with Gregory. Stay at his place. Keep your eyes peeled and your ears cocked. Them stolen horses is down yonder somewheres in the brakes, and if any man kin locate 'em, Gregory Doney kin.

"When Till sobers up and cools off he'll git the right of things. He's the squarest man in the world and we know it. But he's plumb loco now with worry. Now don't you fret none. Don't quit Till. He shore needs you right now. Hell, he's cussed me out worse'n he cussed you. I ain't never quit 'im in a tight. I don't aim to now.

"Don't be su'prised if I show up down at the Doney place. I got a ca'tridge or two with Chalk Plunkett's brand on the lead. Take 'er easy, Clay. You and big Gregory be lookin' fer Uncle Ben about tomorrow night."

Clay saddled a fresh horse and followed big Gregory's wagon into the badlands and along the wagon trail that led to the Missouri River.

He was young enough to feel a little sorry for himself. Till had condemned him without giving him a fair chance to tell how the play had come up. Big Gregory and old Uncle Ben were the only friends he had on earth. And he somehow got the notion that behind Till Culbertson's whiskey tirade there was a hidden reason that belonged to his own mysterious past.

Why hadn't Till Culbertson or old Uncle Ben ever told him the name of his

real father? What was there about that past that had to be kept hidden and buried like it was a thing to be ashamed of?

Clay remembered how the Lady used to take his face between her hands and stare so searchingly into his eyes and shake her head. Who was he? What was his real name? Why had he been adopted? What was the need of being so secretive about it all? What was it that Roy had found out within the past year or two that had made him begin to look at Clay like he hated him?

Twice now, when Roy Culbertson had been ornery and drunk, he had called Clay a damned stray. For ten years Roy had known that Clay was an adopted son but it hadn't made any difference until the past year or so. And Roy was in the habit of bragging when he was drunk that some day he would own the Double Circle outfit. While Till had repeated many a time that when he died the Double Circle would go equally to Roy and Clay. Roy knew something.

Maybe Uncle Ben was not just a childish old coot playing *The Pinkerton Boys in Chinatown* when he said Ah Hell was behind it. Ah Hell just about worshipped Till. And the old Chinaman knew that Roy was Till's real son. That Clay was Till's foster-son. Clay knew that Roy had borrowed money from Ah Hell to pay off gambling debts. . . .

AS they reached Gregory Doney's place on the Missouri River, the sun rose in a crimson streaked sky. Gregory's big sons were nowhere in sight. Just the smaller kids. And Rose Marie was standing in the cabin doorway in a red checked gingham dress and bare legs and beaded moccasins. Reddish tints showed in her black hair where the sun hit it. Her brown eyes were warm, and a faint flush was on her freckled oval face. Rose Marie was the best looking girl in the cow country.

"By gar!" boomed big Gregory's hearty voice, "H'I'm shore forget to buy de grob h'in town. H'I'm forget de red ribbon, de beads for de moccasins, de candy for de kids."

He climbed down over the wagon wheel and the youngsters swarmed up his long, tough muscled legs. Small hands probing his pockets. Shrill squeals as they found sacks of candy. The squaw smiled and handed Rose Marie a bulky package wrapped in store paper, tied with red string. There was grub in the wagon.

"By gar, H'I'm forget de ho'l woman, he's got de hay money, all but five dollars. H'all I got left from dat hay money is one jug for to mak' de dance. Ho, Rose Marie, you see who's come along, hey? You got de catfish h'an' de deer meat for breakfast? Dat Clay she'll be hongry, I bet."

The Doney cabin had dirt floors that had been wet down and packed until they were as hard as rock beneath the rag rugs, woven of gay colored cloth. Pots and pans and dishes were scoured till they shone. On the walls were holy pictures, brought home from the Mission school by the children. The place was cleaner than most white men's ranch homes. Big Gregory was almighty proud of it all.

Clay had stopped here many times before. Winter times, when he had stayed at the Hawley line camp, he had visited here. It was a good place to come to now. These 'breeds were a happy-go-lucky, carefree people. He needed their gaiety to drive that black brooding out of his system.

He put up his horse and washed up. When Pete and John and young Gregory got home they'd go swimming in the river. He asked Rose Marie where her brothers were. She pointed down the river towards the Hawley place.

"I don't know why they went. Don't tell papa. They pulled out night before last, after papa went to Landusky for grub. I'm scared for them. That Tug came for them and had a bottle and they talked at the barn. Tug came back last night but I wouldn't let him in the cabin. He got mad and went away. He was drunk. He said I'd better treat him good or it would be too bad for papa and the boys. He makes me scared, Clay. That Tug is tough. But don't tell papa."

Clay had stopped at the Doney place when the meat they ate was not venison but beef. "Slow elk," they called it along the River, and no hide hung on the fence to show the ownership brand of the beef. But the Doneys looked after the Double Circle cattle and Till said they were welcome to eat what beef they needed. Veni-

son and catfish didn't make a good steady diet.

Gregory and his boys were crack shots. Their saddle guns were not in the gun rack in the log cabin bunkhouse. Clay remembered that some twenty-five head of Double Circle horses had been stolen. He hoped that the Doney boys weren't mixed up in it.

Big Gregory was worried about his three boys being done. He had held out their haying wages because he was afraid they'd blow their money in town or at the whiskey peddler's across the river. He wanted them to buy horses or cattle with their earnings.

THEY were eating breakfast when Pete and John and young Gregory rode up and turned loose their sweat-marked, legweary horses. Their eyes were bloodshot and they were a little tipsy. They exchanged covert, meaning looks when they saw Clay.

"We heard you killed Roy," said Pete Doney.

"By gar, where you hear 'bout dat?" Big Gregory asked quickly.

"One of them Texas fellers met us on the trail," said John Doney, giving Pete a sharp warning look. "You kill him, Clay?"

"Go soak your heads in the river," Rose Marie said sharply. "Clay didn't kill anybody."

Big Gregory swung his legs over the bench and quit the breakfast table. He stared hard at his three stalwart sons.

"Somebody," he said, his face stern, "she's steal a bonch h'of dem Double Circle horses de night before las'. Mabby tonight, tomorrow night we steal dem horses back. Now wash de dronk from de heads h'an' h'eat de grob."

Clay quit the table and went outside. He looked at the three gaunt-flanked horses that were enjoying the luxury of a roll after being ridden hard. They were not Doney horses. They wore blotched brands. And they looked like the Texas horses he had seen in the Plunkett remuda, smaller and lighter boned than the Montana horses.

Big Gregory noticed the strange horses and fired a sharp question at his big sons.

"We traded for 'em," said Pete. "Got money to boot." He pulled some crumpled greenbacks from his overalls pocket.

Gregory scowled and grunted something and loaded his long stemmed trade pipe with a mixture of tobacco and kinni-kinnik. His eyes looked worried.

CHAPTER FIVE

Into the Gun-Trap!

THE Doney boys, still in their 'teens were big, strapping 'breed youngsters who—according to Uncle Ben—had never had to do a hell of a lot of thinking for themselves. Big Gregory had always given them a whipping when he had a notion they deserved one. And after breakfast he took them around behind the barn, while Clay grabbed himself a few hours sleep.

When Gregory came from behind the barn he had all the money Pete and John and young Gregory had had in their pockets. He handed over a hundred dollars to his wife, holding out ten for another jug and tobacco.

Clay had not slept for two nights. It was dusk when he opened his eyes and Gregory told him he had been sleeping all day.

"Lak h'ol ba'er h'in de winter! By gar, you mak' de beeg sleep!"

The three Doney boys were gone. And Gregory had sent a younger boy Joe to the Double Circle ranch with a message for Uncle Ben. Some partly hidden excitement was working on the big half-breed. Clay took a quick dip in the river and rubbed his knife cuts with some of Ah Hell's herb ointment that was already healing the wounds with almost miraculous rapidity. He ate a big supper and drank a lot of steaming strong black coffee.

The big half-breed had cleaned his own saddle gun and Clay's carbine. They saddled their horses and waited for Uncle Ben to show up.

When an hour or so had gone by and the little old cowpuncher did not show and young Joe Doney had not returned from the Double Circle with any kind of news, big Gregory began to fret. He told Clay that he had sent Pete and

John and young Gregory to the Hawley place to get the horses that had been stolen from the Double Circle horse camp, and that more stolen horses were being moved tonight. He'd found that organized horse thieves were holding a big bunch of stolen horses back in the badlands on the south side of the river. Some cowpunchers had been shot down when they tried to stop the horse thieves.

It was an organized move on the part of Chalk Plunkett and his Tascosa renegades and a horse thief gang who took orders from Dude Diamond to take over all the cow-country in the badlands on both sides of the river. They planned to wipe out the Double Circle and some other outfits buy out the 'breed ranchers like Gregory Doney with a jug of bad whiskey and a few dollars and some promises they'd break later on.

Pete and John and young Gregory had gotten all the information from young Tug Plunkett who bragged tough when he was drunk.

A half-breed had stopped at the Doney place during the day while Clay was asleep, fetching news. The talk at Pike Landusky's saloon was that Clay had killed Roy Culbertson. That Dude Diamond had bought up all of Roy's old gambling debts for less than half price. Together with what Dude Diamond had won from Roy playing poker, those gambling debts with Roy's signature on the I.O.U.'s amounted to one hell of a lot of money—more money than Till Culbertson had in the bank.

According to the Landusky report, Dude Diamond held enough of Roy's gambling debts to give him at least a half interest in the Double Circle outfit.

There was no actual law that could force payment on gambling debts. But in that frontier country such debts were honored. And Till Culbertson was a man whose strict code would demand that those poker debts of his son Roy be paid. Lacking cash money, Till would be forced to pay off with land, cattle and horses.

ACCORDING to big Gregory, this Dude Diamond was no newcomer. Dude and a picked gang of outlaws had holed-up in the Montana badlands for months. The fancy-dressed Dude had no actual interest in the Plunket trail herd. He had met Chalk Plunkett and his stolen herd about a week or ten days ago, and had driven some sort of outlaw bargain with the chalk-eyed Plunkett, which had been all to the gambler's advantage.

Chalk Plunkett and his Tascosa renegades had found themselves and their cattle in a neat trap set by Dude Diamond. There wasn't a hell of a lot that Plunkett could do about it except fight. And Dude Diamond wasn't ready to fight. The wily Dude was waiting for Till Culbertson and Chalk Plunkett to lock horns and fight it out. Let the Tascosa renegades and the Double Circle cowpunchers kill off one another. And when both outfits were crippled and hamstrung, Dude Diamond and his outlaws would ride down out of the badlands and claim the spoils.

Such was the news that big Gregory had sent to Uncle Ben in a letter he had dictated to Rose Marie, who had been to the mission school and knew how to write.

Pete, John and young Gregory had been hired, when they were well primed with Injun whiskey, to help run off a bunch of Double Circle horses. It was typical of big Gregory that he had taken their hard-earned money and had sent them to steal back the horses and throw them into the Double Circle horse pasture.

Clay had seen big Gregory send Pete, when Pete was fourteen, into a big cave to kill a mountain lion. Pete, with a big heavy octagon barreled .45-70 rifle longer than himself.

"Go h'in h'an' kill de lion," Gregory had told the boy.

Pete had been scared, but he had gone in. There had been a wait of what seemed hours, then the heavy cannon-loud report of the big black-powder gun. And after a time Pete had come out, dragging the dead carcass of the lion with a bullet hole square between the yellow cat eyes.

The cave had been dark, Pete said. All he could see were the two eyes. It had been too dark to line his gun sights.

But Pete Doney had barged in and killed his lion.

Now big Gregory had sent that same Pete and his brothers John and young Gregory to steal back those Double Circle horses. That was big Gregory Doney's way.

Nor was big Gregory asking his sons to do a job he would not tackle himself. He had been not much older than young Pete when he had climbed a tree after a wounded lion and had killed the lion with no other weapon than a hunting knife. Gregory's huge body still bore the lone white scars of that historic encounter. Now big Gregory was ready to tackle the Plunkett outfit or Dude Diamond's outlaws.

showed Clay the bear hide and explained how the job would be done. Clay was getting restless and uneasy. The palms of his hand were moist, and he wiped them along his thighs. Big Gregory took small, cautious nips at the jug. He had to watch himself that he did not drink too much.

Then they heard the sound of riders. Clay heaved a sigh of relief and started to walk out from the shadows, but Gregory pulled him back. The big half-breed was right. It was not Uncle Ben nor the three Double Circle cowpunchers out there in the darkness.

It was young Tug Plunkett and three of Plunkett's Tascosa renegades who were coming up at a long trot.

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HE WISHED Uncle Ben would show up because the old cowpuncher knew better how to go about it. But if Uncle Ben did not show up in another hour. Gregory told Clay, they'd tackle the job without him. They would swim the river and stampede the big bunch of stolen horses Dude Diamond's outlaws were holding in a hidden pasture over on Crooked Creek.

Gregory knew how the Indians stampede a bunch of horses of a moonlight night like this. He had ridden off that morning and killed a cinnamon bear, and now the fresh hide hung on the fence.

A man on foot, wearing a bear hide and crawling through the brush with the wind taking the bear smell to a bunch of horses, would do the trick—if the wearer of the bear hide knew how to work it. A few shots would keep the spooked horses running. There would be two-three men at the most on horse guard. They might have to kill those men.

As they squatted in the dark shadows behind the barn and waited for the coming of Uncle Ben, big Gregory

BIG Gregory pulled Clay down in behind a heavy red willow thicket and they watched Tug Plunkett and his men ride up to the lighted cabin. Tug Plunkett swung off his horse and pounded on the door. It opened and Rose Marie stood in the lighted doorway.

"Where's your brothers? Where's your old man?" Tug Plunkett's voice was loud and harsh and ugly sounding. He was half drunk.

"They're gone. What do you want? Whew, you smell of whiskey!"

Tug Plunkett laughed. "Just as I figgered, boys—no men folks home. Pickin's! Two of you set fire to the barn and haystacks. Turn loose what horses they left in the barn. Hatch, you run the squaw and the brats out. They'll take to the brush. Set the cabin afire. I'll take care of this purty little squaw. We'll learn them horse-stealin' 'breeds better'n to double-cross the Plunkett outfit, damn their 'breed hides—"

Tug grabbed Rose Marie by the arm and jerked her almost off her feet. His long arms went around her. She fought like a wildcat. Tug let out a howl of

pain as she sank her white teeth in his cheek when he tried to kiss her. She broke away, jumped back into the cabin and slammed the door, barring it from the inside.

Two of the men rode at a lope towards the barn. One of them was laughing as he called back across his shoulder: "Skin your wildcat, Tug."

Clay had jerked loose from Gregory's grip on his shoulder. He ran from the brush, his carbine in his hands. Big Gregory's gun cracked and one of the two riders heading for the barn jerked sideways in his saddle.

Tug Plunkett made a grab at his bridle reins and his horse snorted and whirled. The other man at the cabin was cussing. Gregory took a shot at him and the man grabbed at his right shoulder, spurring his horse as he headed back the way he had come.

"Fill your hand, Tug Plunkett!" yelled Clay. "Fight like a man!"

Then he and Tug Plunkett were shooting at one another.

A slug cut the outer side of Clay's thigh and he stumbled and went down on one knee. He dropped his carbine and jerked his six-shooter. Tug was weaving on widespread legs like a drunken man trying to keep his balance, as his six-shooter spat fire.

Clay went down on one knee and shot as fast as he could thumb back the hammer of his gun and pull the trigger. Tug Plunkett's long legs buckled and the young Texan went down and lay on his face in the dirt, still gripping his gun in one outflung hand.

Big Gregory hauled Clay to his feet. A dead man lay not more than two hundred feet away, between the cabin and barn. The other two Tascosa men had ridden off as fast as they could make their running horses travel. They were shouting that the drunken young Tug had pulled them into a damned bushwhacker gun-trap. To hell with the young smart-Alec whelp and his 'breed gals!

Tug Plunkett was dead. Later big Gregory counted five bullet holes in the young Texan's body. And Clay had come out of his first gun-fight with a bullet rip in his leg and a ragged hole in the crown of his hat.

BIG GREGORY'S squaw and Rose Marie were fastening a tight bandage on Clay's bullet-torn leg when Uncle Ben and four Double Circle cowhands rode up out of the night.

"You able to fork a horse, Clay?" he snapped. "Good! We need every man we kin git. We just come from the Hawley place. Nobody there. Chalk Plunkett and his Tascosa outfit is headed fer the Double Circle ranch. We missed 'em on the road. They musta swung off to hit Landusky and pick up Dude Diamond and what's left of Diamond's horse-thief outlaws.

"A posse of cowmen raided their camp on Crooked Crick, shot it out with 'em and got back a big bunch of horses. Four-five outlaws got away and headed fer Landusky. Dude Diamond has to throw in strong now with Chalk Plunkett. They'll ride down on Till Culbertson at the Double Circle ranch, shore as hell. Let's git there!"

Rose Marie flung her arms around Clay's neck and kissed him. He held her tightly for a moment and kissed her hard.

"We'll git married at the mission when the dust clears," he grinned at her.

Uncle Ben pointed to Tug Plunkett's dead body. "Who's he?"

"Tug Plunkett," said Clay. "I shot 'im."

"Well I'll be damned." Huh! Don't brag about it. Git goin'!"

"Is Roy dead?" Clay asked Uncle Ben when they got under way.

"Don't know, Clay. These boys rode up right after you pulled out. I taken 'em and headed fer the Hawley place. We met more riders. They was headed for the horse-thief hideout acrost the Missouri on Crooked Crick. We lent 'em a hand, then crossed back and hit the Hawley place at dusk.

"The drunk cook there said some of Dude Diamond's men had crossed the river an hour ahead of us. That they'd changed horses and headed fer Landusky with Chalk Plunkett and his Tascosa renegades to meet Dude. That they was goin' to wipe out the Double Circle outfit, and young Tug taken three men and headed fer the Doney place."

A grin split his weathered face. "Seems that the three Doney boys had just about set the Plunkett outfit afoot when they run off the remuda and some stolen Double Circle horses.

"Hard to say what's bin goin' on at the ranch. Mebbyso Roy's dead. I dunno, and don't give a damn. I didn't git to drag that Chinee around by his long pigtail. But he's at the bottom of it, bet on that. He's a Tong man. *The Pinkerton Boys in Chinatown* tells me how they smoke hop and choke a feller to death with a silken cord—"

Half way between the Doney place and the Double Circle home ranch they sighted three riders hazing a big bunch of horses. Big Gregory grinned and fired off his gun three times. One of the riders answered the signal.

"Dem fellers," said Gregory proudly, "dey'll be Pete h'an' John h'an' young Gregory."

"Tell 'em," said Uncle Ben, "to throw them horses into the brakes and hold 'em till fu'ther orders. They got the bulk of Plunkett's remuda."

Gregory nodded, shake to his three sons, caught up with Uncle Ben and Clay and the Double Circle men.

They were ten miles from the ranch when young Joe Doney rode up out of the night. The 'breed boy's face looked white and scared.

Gregory questioned the boy sharply. Young Joe gave quick replies. Some of the talk was in Cree. Big Gregory interpreted.

"One beeg bonch of feller is mak' beeg fight hat de ranch. Joe she's ron lak hell h'on de horse."

Uncle Ben cussed and rode on, his white whiskers bristling. Clay rode alongside the old cowpuncher. Gregory told young Joe where to find his brothers and the horses, for Joe to stay with Pete and John and young Gregory.

Uncle Ben was almighty worried. Clay shared the old cowhand's troubled thoughts. They pushed their horses to the limit. They sighted a dull red glow in the sky and Uncle Ben groaned.

"Them buzzards has set the ranch afire!"

They could make out the faint sound of distant gunfire. Their horses, pushed to a long trot, seemed to be standing still. Uncle Ben and Clay were riding in the lead as they followed the trail down a slant and into the brush and willows that lined the banks of a creek.

Guns blazed from the heavy buckbrush on both sides of the wagon trail. Big Gregory and the Double Circle cowpunchers came down the slant with their horses spurred to a run. It was an ambush, and they had ridden into it.

Their only bet was to shoot their way through. They charged the hidden bushwhackers with a swift rush. Guns roared on all sides.

"They got me!" snarled Uncle Ben. "Keep a-goin', Clay! Ride like hell! Ride, you damned young fool!"

But Clay had whirled his horse and charged into the brush shooting. The Double Circle cowpunchers were fighting like seasoned gun-slingers. The fight was fast and deadly, and it ended as abruptly as it had begun.

Uncle Ben had been shot through the shoulder and through one leg. One of the Double Circle men had been killed. Big Gregory counted four dead bushwhackers, four horses with empty saddles.

They took time to tie up Uncle Ben's wounds despite his profane orders to go on and leave him. Big Gregory handed Uncle Ben a bottle and they left the wounded old warrior there in the brush beside the creek to take it easy until they could send a wagon for him. Then they shoved on.

CHAPTER SIX

Death Waits at the Double Circle Ranch

THE big log house at the Double Circle was a mass of flames. The barn doors were shut and from inside the barn a couple of guns were defending it. The bunkhouse was ablaze. But the log cook cabin with its kitchen and eating room was still intact. Somebody inside was making a desperate stand.

Clay and big Gregory and the Double Circle cowpunchers pulled up behind the strip of willows along the creek and sized up the situation. As near as they could tell by the blaze from the burn-

ing buildings, and by counting the occasional spurts of gun flame at the barn and cook cabin, there were no more than three men in the barn. Two men in the sod-roofed cook cabin. And at least ten men were scattered in the brush, behind the rows of cordwood, and in the shelter of the blacksmith shop who were spotted as Tascosa men or some of Dude Diamond's outlaws.

Gregory, Clay and three Double Circle men sat their horses behind the willows. Clay grinned mirthlessly as he heard Till Culbertson's voice shouting from the barn loft.

"How you doin', Roy?"

And it seemed to Clay that he had never heard music that sounded sweeter than Roy Culbertson's voice shouting an answer.

"Ain't had so much fun since me and Clay celebrated our first firecracker Fourth of July. Ah hell's whittlin' another notch on his gun. He's a sharpshooter."

"Don't waste your bullets!" Till shouted a grim warning. "Shoot for their bellies!"

Till Culbertson and a man or two were making their stand at the barn. Roy and the Chinaman were inside the cook cabin. They would be running short of cartridges, Clay figured. And they were badly outnumbered.

A case or two of ammunition kept in the bunkhouse now began exploding inside the burning building, making a terrific racket. The flames and sparks shot high in the darkness, lighting up the whole ranch with a reddish glow.

Clay grabbed big Gregory's arm and pointed. They could see Chalk Plunkett and Dude Diamond, saddle guns in their hands, standing in behind the long log walls of the shed where the wagons and haying machinery were kept. But the range was too far for any sort of accurate shooting.

"If we could pick them two off," muttered Clay, sighting his carbine. But Gregory pulled his gun barrel down.

"Not now. Too far. Bimeby we mak' de beeg su'prise. Hol' de fire."

The firing had died down to an occasional shot. Plunkett and Dude Diamond were calling their men in behind the long shed for some kind of a plan of attack. The fighting was at a deadlock. The invaders could not charge the barn or cook cabin without making targets of themselves. Till Culbertson and his badly out-numbered outfit were making a tough stand.

The Tascosa men and Dude Diamond's outlaws had left their saddled horses in a corral behind the brush. Big Gregory told Clay to wait and hold his fire. The big half-breed dismounted and slipped through the brush on foot. There was only one man guarding the saddled horses in the corral.

CLAY saw Gregory slip through the brush like an Indian stalking a wild animal. The man on guard rolled a cigarette. He was holding a match flame cupped in his hands when the big half-breed crept up behind him and hit him over the head with the barrel of his carbine. The man dropped like a shot beef.

Gregory went in the corral. He pulled off bridles and hackmores. Riding one horse, he drove the other saddled horses out through the corral gate and started them drifting across the open country. Big Gregory had set the invaders afoot. Then he rode back to the brush along the creek and turned the horse he had ridden loose to follow the other horses.

A rider loomed up in the moonlight. Clay lowered his gun as he recognized old Uncle Ben. The tough old cowpuncher had followed them. And he proceeded to take charge right now, wounded, blood-spattered, and fighting drunk.

"Yonder's Dude Diamond and Chalk Plunkett and their curly wolves, bunched up behind the wagon shed, makin' war-medicine. Ye'll smoke 'em out into the open. The wind's just right and the brush is dry. Set your fires in behind 'em. We'll smoke them sons out into the open and ride 'em down. Where's that big half-breed?"

Gregory came through the brush, just as the man he had knocked out at the corral came awake. The horse guard sat up, rubbed his head, then got to his feet. Letting out a wild yell.

Clay could see the man, plain as day in the reflection of the fire. He was wav-

ing his gun and yelling, stumbling into the empty corral and out again, shouting hoarsely.

"We're afoot! They stole the horses! They hit me on the head and set us afoot!" he shouted, then began running through the brush. He splashed across the creek, scrambled up the other bank and pawed through the willows.

"Git in behind 'em," Uncle Ben gave orders in a harsh whisper. "Set the brush afire. The fire'll take the shed. Shed ain't worth a damn nohow. Needed fixin'. This outfit's needed new wagons fer years. Burn 'em out.

"Only buildin's left standin' now is the cook cabin and barn. They'll run fer the barn. Then you got 'em in the open. Pickin's!"

Gregory was already going back through the brush, the Double Circle men right behind him. There was a stiff little wind, fanning half a dozen brush fires. Smoke and flames swept towards the long wagon shed where Chalk Plunkett was holding the luckless horse guard by the front of his shirt and pounding the man's face with short, merciless blows. His Tascosa men moved around uneasily, talking, cussing.

Old Uncle Ben, bandaged and blood-smeared, gripped his saddle horn. His puckered eyes were bloodshot. A faint grin twisted his bearded face.

"I'm all shot to hell, Clay. Mebby I'm a goner. Listen to what I'm a-sayin'. It's about you and Roy. Roy's a Plunkett. His daddy was Clay Plunkett. Clay married Till's only sister, married her secret. Because the Culbertsons and Plunkett outfit was enemies.

"You and Roy was born the same night, in the same cabin, durin' the thick of the gun-fightin' at Tascosa, where Culbertsons and Plunketts was a-killin' one another.

"I'D BIN shot bad. I was alone with them two wimmen—Clay's wife and Till's missus. I done the doctor job, fetched both them babies into the world. Clay Plunkett's wife was a-dyin', and Till's missus was lyin' there, white-faced and quiet with that queer sorta blank look in her eyes. Her mind was gone, though we never realized it till later.

"Me all shot to hell and workin' on whiskey, in 'tendin' them two babies I got 'em mixed in the shuffle. Clay's wife died. I give Till's missus both you babies to nurse, left it up to her to claim her own. She kinda favored the one we named Roy fer Till's daddy.

"You was named fer Clay Plunkett, who got killed in the fightin' that night. And it was only when you two boys commenced to grow up that me'n Till knowed we'd made a mistake. . . . Looky yonder! See that big red-headed feller with Chalk? He's a Plunkett. One of the red Plunketts. See how he looks like Roy? Clay Plunkett was one of the red Plunketts. And you're the spittin' image of Till when he was your age. Hear me, Clay?"

Clay nodded, dazed. Then he gave a hoarse shout, pointing towards the barn. The rear of it was afire. The front doors were flung open, and saddled horses were being hazed out of the burning barn. They stampeded away.

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Clay shouted at Gregory and the Double Circle men to start shooting. They swung back on their horses and Clay led them as they charged the rear of the wagon shed, just as the flames caught the brush near the shed and drove Chalk Plunkett and his men into the open. Plunkett and Dude ran into the shed and came out on horseback.

Big Gregory and the three Double Circle men and the strip of blazing brush barred any retreat in that direction. Dude Diamond and Chalk Plunkett had to ride across the open strip between the blazing barn and the cook cabin. And the cook cabin was now ablaze. It had been fired at the same time that the barn had been set afire.

Clay saw the lanky red-headed man Uncle Ben had called a red Plunkett make a run for Chalk Plunkett. Chalk turned sideways in his saddle as the red-headed Plunkett grabbed his bridle reins. Chalk's six-shooter blazed and the lanky red-headed Plunkett went down, shot in the head.

Then Till Culbertson, hazing the last of the horses, rode out of the blazing smoke filled barn, just as Clay rode out into the open to head off Chalk Plunkett and Dude Diamond. Clay let out a cowboy yell.

Dude Diamond turned in his saddle, then tilted his gun and shot twice in the air.

"Live a long time, young Clay!" the range dude called in a hard, clear-toned voice. "Live a long time, Clay Culbertson! I'll be needin' you!"

Clay lowered his gun. He saw Till Culbertson and Chalk Plunkett riding at each other, their guns spewing flame. He saw Till's horse pile up, shot in the head. Till was thrown heavily. Chalk Plunkett rode at the fallen cowman.

Clay yelled, rode in between and took a bullet in the shoulder. He rode straight at Chalk Plunkett, shooting as he rode. Then their horses collided.

Clay's horse was thrown sideways and Clay went down. He saw Chalk Plunkett's ugly face, saw the big Tascosa man's gun-barrel swing down to shoot.

Then a carbine cracked and Chalk Plunkett's big frame jerked backwards. His heavy body hit the ground not ten feet from where Clay was twisting loose from his stirrup as his horse scrambled to its legs.

Then Clay saw Roy, his smoking carbine in his hand. Roy was blood-spattered and swaying unsteadily like a drunken man.

"My last damned ca'tridge," Clay heard Roy shout. "I was savin' it for you, Clay. I'm damned if I know what changed my mind."

Roy coughed, blood spilling from his mouth. His knees gave way and he sat down, then rolled over and lay there on his side.

DUDE DIAMOND was riding off, his fancy six-shooter smoking, an ugly grin on his face. And somehow Clay knew that it was Dude's shot that had finished Roy. Dude wanted the Double Circle outfit.

There was nothing now to stop Dude Diamond. The gambler was near the shelter of the brush. Uncle Ben was down somewhere and out of the fighting. Gregory and the Double Circle men had their own fight with the Tascosa renegades and Dude Diamond's outlaws.

Dude Diamond pulled up, whirled his horse, and his flat-toned voice barked at Clay.

"Till Culbertson's dead. I just killed the red-headed whelp he calls Roy Culbertson. I'm savin' you. You'll own the Double Circle. You'll run it accordin' to my orders. I'll show up now and then for pay-offs. String along with me and we'll own this whole damned cow-country. Weaken, and you'll get what I just gave Roy—"

There was a shrill cackling wail. Standing in front of the blazing cook cabin was a small weasened Chinaman in a loose fitting blouse. His long queue swung in the wind. There was a long-barreled, silver-mounted pearl-handled six-shooter in his clawlike hand.

"You killee Loy! You killee Loy!" Ah Hell screamed shrilly.

He emptied his gun at the gambler. Dude Diamond caught the first slug in the belly. Dude's first shot hit the Chinaman. Then his shot went wild. The gun fell from his hand and he slid off his horse, landing in a heap on the ground.

Ah Hell, the smoking six-shooter in his hand, shuffled slowly out to where Roy lay on the ground. His wrinkled yellow face was a mask of pain and stark grief. There was a widening red stain across the front of his white jacket.

He squatted down on the ground, trying to wipe the flowing blood from Roy's mouth, but Ah Hell read death in Roy's glazing green eyes.

A thin wail was torn from the old Chinaman's throat. Then a look of peace crossed the wrinkled yellow face. Ah Hell's head bent forward and he toppled slowly, falling beside the red-headed young cowboy whom he had worshipped from childhood.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Echoes of Texas Guns

BIG GREGORY got the Landusky doctor sobered up by the time the wagon carrying Uncle Ben, Till Culbertson, Clay and several Double Circle men—wounded survivors of the Double Circle battle—to town. Later, they buried Roy at the ranch and Ah Hell was buried alongside Roy's grave.

"I've known for a long time, I reckon," Till Culbertson told Clay and Uncle Ben, "that Clay was my own son. That Roy was Clay Plunkett's boy. Mebbyso that's what made me easier with Roy than ever I was on Clay. I didn't want Clay to show no weak streaks like was croppin' out in Roy. Clay was my own son and I wanted to be almighty proud of him. And when I thought my own son had showed a weak streak on account of a girl, it shore turned me inside out."

"It was the likker that done it," said Uncle Ben. "You never could handle it."

"My son Bob was killed on account of booze," said Till. "Him and Clay Plunkett got drunk at Tascosa. There was trouble over some cattle. Bob accused Clay Plunkett of sellin' Double Circle cattle to Chalk and Red Plunkett. Clay Plunkett shot Bob and killed him.

"Clay Plunkett was married to my only sister, Clay," Till Culbertson explained, "and for a year or two it looked like he was plumb ag'in' his cattle stealin' Plunkett kin. But Bob had bin right. Clay Plunkett was double-crossin' me. And when Bob accused him, at Tascosa he was in the right. I knowed it.

"There was other Culbertsons then and other Plunketts. We tangled in a hell of a bloody cattle war.

"It was me that killed Clay Plunkett, my sister Sue's husband and the father of her baby boy. Though she died never knowin' it. And I swore I'd raise her son, Clay Plunkett's boy, as my own. I done my best to keep that promise.

"When you told me that the red-headed baby was mine, Ben, I never doubted it. But you never fooled the Lady. She knowed, even though her mind was gone, Losin' Bob just before the baby was born like to killed her. Her hair turned white and her mind went kinda blank. But she always knowed that Clay, not Roy, was her own son. She told me that more than once in her own quiet little way. And she'd look at Clay and smile and shake her head, sayin' to herself that nobody could fool her. That Clay was her own flesh and blood boy.

"Ah Hell taken some queer Chinee fancy to little Roy. Ah Hell figgered in his Chinee way that he owed his life to me. And because he figgered Roy was my own son, he done his best to give Roy everything.

"Roy would show up drunk and Ah Hell would hide him in his cabin and sober him up. When Roy lost at gamblin' the Chinaman paid off his debts.

"Ah Hell brought Roy outa his last drunk. It was poison likker, not that crack on the head that ailed Roy. The Chinaman give him somethin' that made him vomit the poison outa his belly. In an hour Roy was on his feet and sneakin' a drink outa my bottle.

"Roy told Ah Hell that he'd lost heavy to Dude Diamond. Ah Hell forked a horse and rode to town to buy up Roy's I.O.U.'s

"Dude Diamond wouldn't sell Roy's gamblin' debts. But when Ah Hell come right out and challenged Dude to gamble for 'em, that dude feller couldn't back down to a damn' Chink.

"That game between Ah Hell and Dude Diamond was short and for high stakes. The Chinaman cleaned Dude Diamond. He won back Roy's I. O. U.'s and

burned 'em there in Pike Landusky's saloon. Then he got on his horse and rode back to the ranch.

"I reckon," finished Till Culbertson, "that if there's a Chinee heaven, Ah Hell got there."

"He still had his pigtail when he died," said Uncle Ben, and then made a reluctant admission. "Them Pinkerton Boys," he said, "said there was some Chinee fellers they could shore trust. Ah Hell musta belonged to that kind of a tong!"

TILL CULBERTSON said he was almighty proud to have a girl like Rose Marie for a daughter-in-law. She and Clay could live at the Hawley place till their new log house was built at the Double Circle home ranch.

Clay was ramrodding the outfit as soon as he was able to ride, and he would have to spend his honeymoon sort of bunged up because as quick as he was able to make a hand he had those Tascosa steers to get located.

They'd need feeding, some of 'em. But Gregory and his boys had put up hay on their place and they savvied how to feed cattle. Gregory would winter some of those Texas cattle on shares. Gregory and his boys were hard to beat.

It was the biggest wedding ever held down on the Missouri River. Antoine Gladeau bought all new strings for his fiddle. Big Gregory and Till Culbertson furnished good whiskey. Fat steers were furnished for meat. The dance lasted as long as the fiddle did.

Clay Culbertson had always been close-mouthed. He never told even Uncle Ben that he'd known Roy and Ah Hell had somehow found out that he and not Clay was Till Culbertson's real son, or that Roy had had a bullet with Clay's name on it—the bullet that Roy had used to kill Chalk Plunkett.

Roy's final gesture had been that of a brave man. It marked off all the other lesser things Roy had done to hurt his foster-brother.

Clay had found Ah Hell's buried gold and other things in the ashes of the Chinaman's burned cabin. With the sacks of nuggets, gold dust and money, was a tintype picture of Clay Plunkett. It could have been a picture of Roy Culbertson, the resemblance was so striking.

Clay Plunkett's name was on the back, with this inscription: "To Sue Culbertson from Clay Plunkett. With Love."

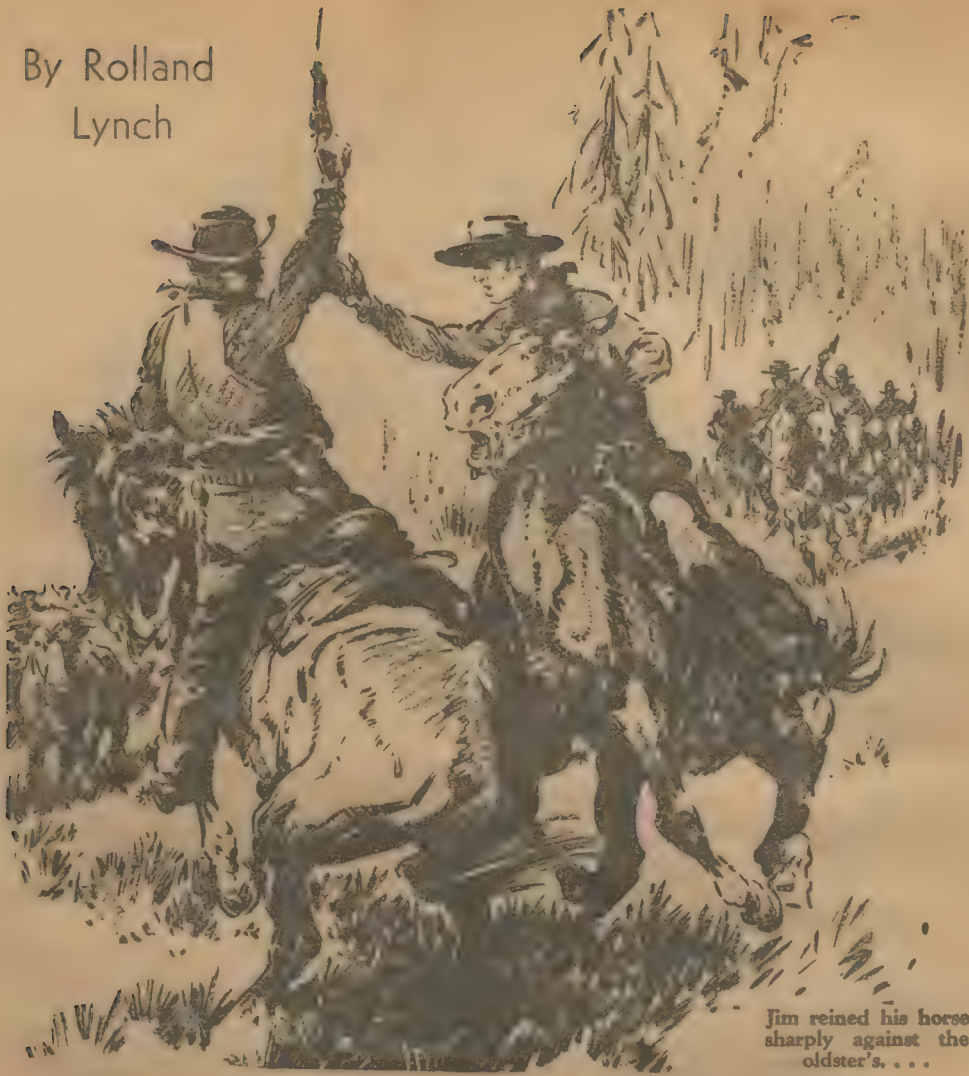
So Ah Hell had known, and Roy had known. And Clay knew that not once but several times Roy had tried to kill him. Behind Roy had been the dark, enigmatic shadow of Ah Hell. Even though the Chinaman now knew that Roy was not the son of Till Culbertson, the habit of years had been too strong to put aside. Ah Hell had always worshipped the red-headed boy.

It would always be a strong temptation to tell old Uncle Ben that he had been right—that *The Pinkerton Boys in Chinatown* had been correct, in this instance, in their recital of the ways of the heathen Chinee.

But Clay Culbertson, from the time he had been a small boy, had never been much of a hand to talk. He carved this on the wooden slab that marked Roy's grave: "Roy, Who Gave His Life For His Brother."

THE END

By Rolland Lynch



Jim reined his horse sharply against the oldster's. . . .

Boss of the Chisholm Trail

Not a man in that rough cowtown saloon ever thought they'd live to see the day when the mighty Buckskin Frank Lawler, king of the plainsmen, would back down from the challenge of a yearling cowpuncher like Jim Duryea. . . . Or yet, that he would ever miss the chance to ruin the cowman who had made his life a lonely, embittered hell!

AT THIS meeting place of the herds beside the Red River, the drovers gathered of an evening at Blackjack's Saloon in Trailtown. Here you could hear the latest news of the Texas saltgrass country, or get month-old information on the Chisholm Trail that stretched ahead to Dodge. Here also gathered men in buckskin, in levies and plaid shirts; Indians in feathered headdress, and narrow-eyed men whose calling was the more obvious by the low hang of their guns.

And this night, while the Blackjack

was crowded with the flotsam of this wild country, the crew fresh in from the Staked Plains started the ball rolling.

The foreman of the drive said over his drink, "We heard the Ace Syndicate, that was going to ship cattle out of Corpus Christi across the gulf and up the Mississippi to Saint Louie, went broke."

The buzz along the bar ceased and men's heads bent forward to look around at the speaker. Big Blackjack stopped his polishing of a whiskey glass and said, "No! That was Buckskin Frank Lawler's scheme, wasn't it? When did it happen?" He poured a drink on the house for the Staked Plains foreman.

The drover swelled importantly and savored his whiskey and let the silence run. This was his dramatic moment and he took advantage of it.

"Two or three months back," he answered at last. "Most of the critters died on the trip. They weren't built for water travel. Hard enough to get 'em over the Trail. The four of five ranches that threw in with the scheme went belly-up. Buckskin Frank sure lost his mocassins in that deal."

"Buckskin Frank Lawler!" murmured a salt grass puncher. "The best damn' longhorn trail boss ever to make the ride to Dodge. Must be pretty hard on him."

"Not too hard," countered the Staked Plains man. "He's tough as the leather he wears, and sharp as a coyote."

"There ain't a drover on the trail that don't know him," said Blackjack as he poured another drink on the house for the Plains man. "He was in Chisholm's party when John broke the trail. He knows every day's drive from the Nueces country to Dodge. Half you foremen here rode with him at one time or another." He looked up and down the bar as heads nodded confirmation.

"A real trailman!" agreed a tall hairpin from the Panhandle. "He could beat the best run made into Dodge by three weeks; never losing a head or gaunting a steer. You put plenty of time in the saddle riding for Buckskin Frank."

"But you were a drover when you got to Dodge," said a stocky puncher from the Texas Big Bend. "You knew how to run the Blackjack Forest and cross the Cimarron at flood. You got your nose sharpened for trail troubles even if you was way back in the dust of his drag."

And so the eulogies were spoken over raw whiskey and Blackjack kept pouring drinks on the house. There was the smell of horse and liquor and tobacco smoke in here, and stoic Indians lined the walls. Serape-draped Mexicans dozed in the cool corners. Outside there was the muted lowing of the herds; and over that the rapid pounding of hoofs as a rider or cavalcade swept the street. But the attention inside now was on anecdotes about Buckskin Frank Lawler.

Everyone along the bar had jammed together in one group. That is, everyone but a broad-shouldered youngster at the door-end of the mahogany. His first drink lay still untouched and his lips were drawn thin.

SOME had left the tables to join in on the yarns. There was one, straight as an Indian with face burned the color of lava rock, who did not move. His big knuckled hands were on the table by his glass. He wore a buckskin jerkin and a black, flat crowned range hat with chin strap. His hair fell frontier length to his shoulders and was shot with gray. The fringe on his buckskin sleeves wavered a little as his hands moved each time Frank Lawler's name was boomed out.

A Pecos man was saying, "Buckskin will have to ride trail again, I guess. Catch on as a regular puncher with some herd."

"Not Lawler," said Blackjack and blew on a glass. "He can get a trail boss job any time he wants it—"

"You're right," said the youngster at the far end of the bar. He drew quick attention with his interruption, because there was both anger and bitterness in his voice.

"Right," he went on. "And he'll take it at the expense of someone else. He'll go over everyone's head to the soft spot. He'd even get someone fired so he could have the job; fired and left here in this hole."

"That's pretty hard talk, Jim. . . ." began the Pecos man.

"Hard talk for Buckskin Lawler?" echoed Jim Duryea harshly. He shuttled scorn-filled eyes from face to face. "You know all about Lawler, all of you, eh? Well, I know him better than any one!

"He and my father had trouble over

water in the Pecos country. He hired gunslammers and got the water and busted us flat; left us nothing but the land. He boasted that a Duryea would never get anywhere for causing him the trouble. And—he's made good his brag!

"I'm riding the dust of the Lazy S herd drag because of him. No one will give me a command. Why? Because Buckskin Frank Lawler has spread the word not to. I've been up the trail more times than any of you—at forty a month and beans. We pulled into here without a foreman. His horse stepped into a prairiedog hole and he busted a shoulder in the fall. But do I get yanked out of the drag and put in charge? No! Buckskin Frank Lawler is in the country, and you can bet he'll rod the herd on to Dodge. But if he tries it, I'll gun him down on sight!"

In the ensuing silence, the man in buckskin at the table rose and came to the unoccupied section of the bar between the group and Jim Duryea. He stood with his hands at his sides and said directly at Jim, "You're talking pretty wild."

Blackjack almost dropped the glass he was polishing as he muttered, "Buckskin!"

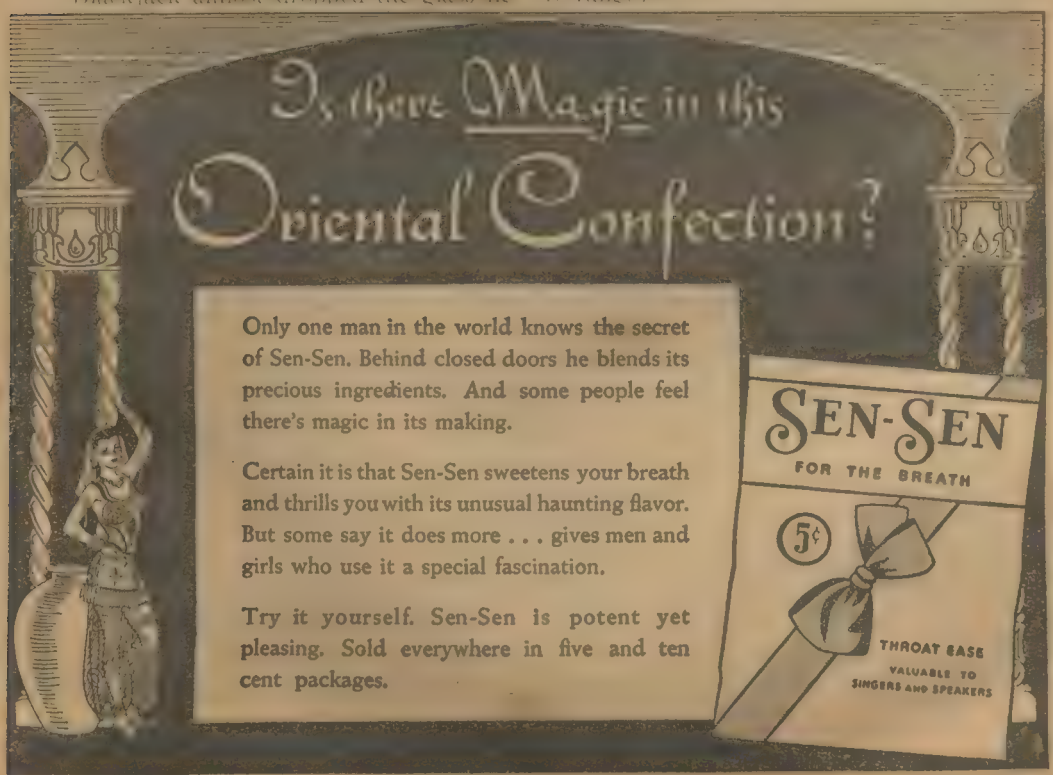
Jim Duryea did not flinch as he faced Buckskin Frank Lawler. "You've had your say about the Duryeas long enough," he said flatly. "You fought us and broke us over water rights that weren't yours and you've kept me back in the drags of herds. Now it'll take your gun to stop me again!"

The crowd at the bar became more compact as they squeezed together to get out of the line of fire.

"It will, if needs be, Duryea," said Lawler evenly. "Your father fired the first shot that started the war."

"Because you were too stubborn to let surveyors in to run a line," Jim said a little wildly. "You were too damn' certain that water was on your range. Well, that line has been run now by government men—and the water's on Duryea property! I'll have money enough some day to restock, and I'll fence you out of the Pecos country!"

Buckskin's gray brows drew together. "You say the water is located on Circle D range?"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"And when I get enough money to fence, not a head of Lawler Bar stock will drink a drop of it!"

The longhorn boss' shoulders settled a little and fire seemed to go out of him. He looked down at the saloon floor and without raising his eyes to Jim Duryea again. Then he stalked from the saloon.

No one said anything as Jim shoved his untouched drink away from him and grinned his trumph. He turned and went to the street.

The group looked at each other, stunned. They'd never thought they'd see the day when Buckskin Frank Lawler would let a challenge go unanswered.

WHEN the lazy S herd splashed across the Red River and headed through Indian Territory toward the Canadian and Kingfisher, Jim Duryea rode at right point. His chest was swelled and he felt mighty proud. He was in command of the herd, his first, at one hundred and fifty a month.

The owner of the cattle had said before departing last night: "The trip's yours now, Duryea. I'll meet you in Dodge with buyers ready. Don't push 'em too hard and gaunt 'em, but don't come in behind those other herds, either. I want 'em in prime shape, and the market's high. If you hit it right there'll be a bonus for you. Good luck!"

That bonus sounded good to Jim. With it he could return to the Pecos country, restock the Circle R, and fence Pinto Wells against Lawler Bar stock.

As he sat his horse high on the red chalk cliffs of the river and watched the last of the herd and the cook's wagon crawl across, he wondered what had happened to Buckskin Frank. He guessed the old drover had ridden out to hide his shame of being faced down. Well, it didn't matter what he had done. Frank Lawler was finished on the trail, and Jim closed the man out of his mind.

He had responsibilities now—two thousand longhorns to get to Dodge. It was no small task, and it would call upon all the knowledge of the trail he possessed. With his riders hazy in the dust of the plodding herd, he swung in at point to lead the way.

This first night, with the cattle circling to bed, Jim got a shock as he rode up to the fire at the cook's wagon. Buckskin Frank Lawler was just returning from the creek with some buckets of water for the night-guards' mounts that wouldn't have time to be turned loose. Jim lit down in front of him.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded.

The dust of the drag was heavy on Buckskin's cheeks, but his eyes were bright. "I'm your cavvy tender," he said, and there was a note of respect in his voice.

"Meant to tell you first chance," said the cook between sips of a steaming ladle. "The Mex ran off with some Injun gal, and this fella wanted the job. I hope I done right, boss."

A slow grin spread Jim's lips. "You did right," he said. "Lawler, when you get everything finished, go out and cut the cook some spare firewood. There won't be any where we stop tomorrow night."

Lawler nodded and stepped around Jim. The young trail-boss' grin deepened. Buckskin Frank was going to get a dose of his own medicine on this trip. He had pushed men to the breaking point to get his herd through. He had pushed Jim Duryea back into the drag time after time, when the kid should have been given charge of a herd. So Jim meant to push Frank Lawler now; and let Frank help make Jim a record. . . .

When the stretch-out cry was about to be flung this morning, Jim went to the cook's wagon and said to Lawler, "Put hackamores on the spare horses and trail them to the wagon. Saddle up one and ride the wheel points. I expect to keep all the bunch quitters in line. You were pretty good at teaching men how to do it, so I expect you can handle it alone." He grinned maliciously.

Buckskin nodded.

Through the following days, Jim drove the oldster relentlessly. Buckskin's leathery face became a little more seamed and his Indian-straight back began to bend a little, but he did not complain.

He kept the cook in wood, saw to building the rope corral for the cavvy at nights. He tended injured hoof vasculars, shot and buried a horse that snapped a leg.

And throughout the day, he rode hard after the bunch quitters; cattle that took a crazy notion to leave the main herd and rabbit into the brush.

At the Cimarron, he was walking a little closer to the ground than he had ever walked. But he was unceasing in his duties and untiring in the saddle during the day.

At the town on the bank of the river, Jim Druyea learned that rustlers were operating amid the Blackjack Forest. He learned that a herd of a thousand head had vanished ahead of him and the only trace was the bodies of the crew driving them.

When he gave the order to cross the river and begin the trek through the ominous forest, he had his men riding with rifles across the pommels of their saddles.

JIM felt his full responsibility now and it made him nervous. And green as he was in command, he issued a lot of unnecessary warnings. The men felt his tension and grew tense themselves.

Three days from the river, a fight broke out over some spilled coffee. Ordinarily, it would have meant nothing. The quick savagery in the explosion proved the hair-trigger temper of the men. Jim waded into it and stopped it before it reached the killing point, but the men were more sullen now.

This fourth day, an hour before dusk, it happened.

Buckskin Frank Lawler and another waddie had just run a herd of ten bunch quitters back into the main body, where Jim Duryea rode point, when the group of riders came out of the forest.

Guns flashed in their hands and they began swiftly racing parallel with the herd.

Jim knew a moment of indecision then.

"Start turning them in," he shouted to his puncher. Then seeing Buckskin's action, cried out: "Put up that gun, you'll stampede 'em."

As Lawler raised it and eared the hammer, Jim reined his horse sharply against the oldster's and reached out. He missed Buckskin's upraised hand.

The puncher who had ridden with Buckskin shouted: "Put it away, Frank. Let the damn' fool lose the critters, after what he's done to you!"

Buckskin's gun bucked in his hand. The rapid reports stirred the sea of horns. Jim tried to get to him before he could draw his second weapon and empty that, but Frank's twisting avoided him. The second string of shots brought a frightened low from the animals and the mass bolted with a thunder of hoofs and sharp clicking of horns.

Jim's men came out of the dust pall and fanned about him. The herd was taking care of itself, running straight ahead. He lost his moment's panic; for he knew how to lead a fight. With a wave of his hand, he charged the oncoming raiders. The only way of telling friend from foe in the dust was the difference in mounts. The outlaws rode scrubby mustang stock.

Weaving in and out of the pall raised by the thundering herd, Jim emptied saddle after saddle. He was unmindful of the pain of a bullet-creased leg. Bandana-masked faces swayed before him and there was the ugly spat of triggered guns. Little of it touched Jim. He wondered why Buckskin Frank Lawler had done this.

Then the fight was over as quickly as it had started. Leaving two Lazy S drovers among the fallen outlaws, Jim raced his men after the lumbering herd.

Finally, the onrush of the cattle began to slacken. It was impossible to keep them bunched, but a minimum of head were lost. They were all under control and circling to bed down for the evening, when Jim rode to the fire and lit gratefully down.

The cook looked up from kneading bannock and said, "Pretty little run we had. The cattle took care of themselves."

Jim nodded. "I learned something," he said. "We didn't waste time by milling them or get caught far apart. We could all fight together. I won't forget it very soon. Buckskin showed me how it was done."

"I heard tell," said the cook, "he's showed half these drovers how to get over the trail."

Jim pondered that as he rode wearily back and buried his dead.

The rest of the way to Dodge, Jim

(Continued on page 99)

A NESTER DIGS HIS GRAVE

By William Benton Johnston

Cowan said, "You're not fool enough to think Clark's bluffing, are you?"

In such simple things as a woman's smile, the trusting touch of children's fingers, and the friendly lights of his ranch, did Clark Longstreet, nester, find his heaven-on-earth. . . . Until the bitter, burning memory of a bullet-shattered man, pleading in vain for life, changed Clark's little world into a bleak and hopeless hell.

THE road dipped down from the ridge and crossed the flats into Sahwave, and Clark Longstreet's wagon with its tall load of hay swayed gently along that rutted and dusty way.

Around him, the haze of Indian summer lay over the land and there was a faint, lingering smell of wood smoke. A distant and invisible touch of winter tem-

pered the sun's heat and the breeze had a faint, prophetic edge to it.

For Clark, this had been a good year, its rewards a full and gratifying compensation, for all its work and worries. His grain was harvested and sacked for milling, the surplus sold at good prices; the barn was filled with winter feed. His few cattle were fat and healthy. There were no debts.

These things, Clark reflected, were the things a man looked upon with pride and satisfaction: fruit of his own labor, earned and deserved.

The wagon rumbled across the arroyo bridge and Clark swung it down Sahwave's single street to Preen's Stable, there unloading the hay into the barn loft.

After that, he unhitched the team and led them out to the water trough. Waiting for the horses to drink their fill, he looked at the town, not liking it and eager to be on his way homeward.

Oliver Preen came out of the stable office and stood beside Clark. "Here's your money," he said. "It's prime hay and the wagon was loaded higher than customary —as usual. You're a good man to do business with, Clark; I'll take another load whenever you want to bring it."

Clark stabled his team and went along the street to the Emporium, speaking to Sam Griggs, behind the counter there, and giving him Ellen's list.

"Add a couple of pounds of candy to that," he told Griggs.

Going back to the stable, he saw Sheriff Nicholson come out to the court house porch and stand there, waiting for him.

"I reckon you'll be coming in for Fred Harmon's trial tomorrow," the sheriff said when Clark came up.

Clark shook his head. "I never cared much for things like that."

The sheriff showed him a curious interest. "I've been hearing some strange talk the past two or three days; was going to ride out to your place this afternoon and ask you about it."

Clark's glance was suddenly narrowed, questioning. "What kind of talk?"

NICHOLSON took the cigar out of his mouth and stared at the end of it. "Some of the boys are saying that you saw Fred when he killed Charlie Thompson—and that you're the only one who knows exactly how it happened."

When Clark made no reply, Nicholson asked, "Why didn't you tell me about this?"

"I try to keep away from trouble, Sheriff, and I don't like taking sides in the quarrels of this town. I keep pretty busy looking after my own affairs."

"But this *is* your affair," Nicholson told him. "You have the protection of the law, and it's your duty to help enforce it. I've got a summons here for you to appear as a witness tomorrow." He read the subpoena, added: "Be here by nine o'clock."

Clark nodded and moved on to the barn and hitched up his team. He drove out of town slowly, his eyes thoughtful and vaguely troubled.

At the crest of the grade he turned northward along the ridge. Two horsemen eemrged from the pines, riding down the trail to meet him.

Even at this distance, Clark recognized the arrogant way Hal Harmon sat his saddle, and recognized the other man as Ben Cowan, foreman of Harmon's H-and-a-Half ranch. Simultaneous with this recognition came the thought that these men had been waiting for him, and the quick, sure knowledge of what they wanted turned Clark's eyes dark and thoughtful.

Harmon pulled out to the left of the road, said, "Just a minute, Longstreet."

Clark tightened the lines and the horses stopped. Behind the wagon the dust boiled up, then drifted away.

Hal Harmon was a big man, with strong, rough-cut features; a man of high pride and a will made intractable by long years of dominating this range.

"You've been subpoenaed as a witness at my son's trial tomorrow, haven't you?" he asked bluntly.

Clark said, "Yes," and centered his attention on Ben Cowan, knowing that the H-and-a-Half foreman had the inherent ruthlessness of a killer; dangerous and touchy.

"I don't know what you saw in that back room at the Buckhorn," Harmon told Clark, "but I *do* know that Fred didn't shoot Charlie Thompson down in cold blood—and this country ain't big

enough to hold me and any damn man who testifies that he did!"

BEN COWAN had shown a precise interest in building up a cigarette, but now it was finished and Clark saw his glance lift, bright and wicked.

"The law-and-order crowd," Cowan said with deceptive mildness, "are trying to make an example of Fred, not remembering how nice and easy the H-and-a-Half has been to them. Hell, Clark, many nights we come riding by *your* place after everything's dark and quiet, and I'm always particular to keep a tight rein on the boys. It'd be mighty easy for a dropped match or a thrown-away cigarette to burn you out or maybe for some of the wilder fellers to get a few drinks under their belts, an' bounce a few bullets through the windows, where your wife and kids are sleeping."

Clark said evenly, "You go a long way around to make a threat, Ben."

"The H-and-a-Half don't make threats," Cowan answered in that same smooth tone. "We tell a man something. If he don't believe it, we're always obliging enough to prove it to him. It would be a mighty good thing for you just to say you didn't see the shooting, and let it go at that."

Hal Harmon's impatience ran high. "To hell with all this talk," he said. "What I'm telling you, Longstreet, is that if you have any idea of testifying that my son didn't give Charlie a fair break, you'd better forget it—if you want to keep on living in East Valley. Understand?"

Clark said dryly, "It's a pretty plain statement."

Cowan drew a little closer and Clark saw the wild hunger in his eyes. His hand was on his gun-butt. He said, "You're not fool enough to think Hal's bluffing, are you?"

Clark said, "No, I don't think he's bluffing."

The glances of these two met and held, then Cowan wheeled his horse and followed Harmon down the trail.

The wagon rolled on.

THIS, Clark reflected, was the way life ran, like a road which lulls a teamster with smooth, level stretches, then throws up high, steep hills to remind him that struggle is a part of existence.

He remembered, with a wry twist of his lips, how his grandfather, a stern and pious old man, had said, "The possession of good things makes us soft, that's why it's easier to get 'em than it is to keep 'em. Which is as it should be, for if everything was always right, here on earth, there wouldn't be any use of looking forward to heaven."

Clark applied the first of this to his own case. He and Ellen had spent the seven years of their married life in hard work and frugal living; honest people trying to make a place for themselves and their children. And now, when the longest pull was over and they had a moment to draw an easy breath, all that they had accomplished was threatened by the brawling of a worthless saddle-bum and the dissolute, gun-reckless heir to the vast H-and-a-Half.

Clark thought regretfully of the events which had inadvertently sent him down the alley back of the Buckhorn that day, just as a gun threw its reports against those flimsy walls. He wished there was some way to erase the memory of what he had seen, but there was no way—no honorable way.

"There are certain things a man must do," he told himself, not realizing how vital a part of his life this simple philosophy was, or how it helped him to a patient acceptance of present circumstances.

At Sweeten's Gap, the trail dropped away from the ridge and Clark could see the long, narrow reach of East Valley. Its grasses were sun-yellowed and its floor lay flat and untimbered except where a green line of cotton woods marked the winding course of the creek.

There, beside the stream, stood Clark's house and its close huddled out-buildings; there were his fenced fields and strip of open range. Beyond rose the high lift of the Antelopes.

As he approached the house, Ellen came out to the yard gate and waited there, lifting little Susan and steadying her so that she could stand on the fence and wave her chubby arms.

Neal ran out to meet the wagon, yelling and stumbling with six-year-old clumsiness; Capitan, the black shepherd, made circles around him, barking now and then.

One of the horses snorted and shied, and Clark pulled him down and chuckled deep in his throat.

He stopped the wogan to give his young son his ride, reaching down and helping him climb over the tall wheel.

"What did you bring us?" Neal asked, and Clark teased him by pretending to ignore the question.

The boy made a grab at the package on the wagon floor and Clark kicked it aside.

"Oh, no, you don't," he grinned, and sat there, watching the swift changes of childish excitement in Neal's features.

HE STOPPED at the yard gate and leaving Neal in proud possession of the lines, and stepped down from the wagon. He pushed his hat back and went to Ellen, matching her smile and putting his arm around her and kissing her.

Susan, the baby, touched his cheek with small, soft fingers and Clark took her and held her for a moment. Then he gave her back to Ellen and brought the package out of the wagon and left it on the porch.

Ellen asked, "What's going on in town?"

Clark said, "Nothing much. Preen liked the hay; I'm taking him another load early in the morning."

He told Neal, "You'd better get out and ride herd on that package, there's a long chance of some candy being inside it."

Whereupon Neal jumped out of the wagon, landed flat-footed and rolled over in the dust, laughing. He scrambled up and ran into the yard, tugging at Ellen's skirt to make her hurry.

In the barn, Clark unharnessed the horses and fed them; pushed the wagon into the hallway so that he could fork down another load of hay from the loft. When these tasks were finished, he walked to the house for dinner.

It was long past mid-day, but Ellen had reckoned the time of his arrival and held the meal back. The children were stuffing candy and she picked up the sack.

"You won't want a bite of dinner," she told them.

Clark said, "Aw, what difference does it make, just so they don't get sick."

OLD MR. BOSTON SAYS: "MY APRICOT NECTAR IS SURE TO PLEASE YOU!"

FOR TASTE, THIS DRINK IS SURE A PIP—
YEP— SMOOTH AND RICH IN EV'RY SIP!
FRIENDS WILL LIKE THIS DRINK A LOT— PROVES YOU REALLY KNOW WHAT'S WHAT!
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OLD MR. BOSTON APRICOT NECTAR

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She wrinkled her nose at him and said, in mock disdain, "You *men!*" and put the candy out of the children's reach.

She took one piece from the sack and pitched it to Clark. He broke it in two, gave half of it to Neal and half to Susan. Then he sat down and lit his pipe and waited while Ellen finished preparing the food.

WATCHING her, Clark saw in her all the things he wanted to see in a woman. He liked the soft run of her laughter and her manner of looking at him and smiling at him; he liked her unfailing sense of humor and the way she had kept her youth.

She was a small woman, but she had strength and her fortitude always amazed him and sometimes made him a little ashamed. Her body had rounded and softened with maturity, yet she had a provocative grace and a way of glancing at him that never failed to make his blood run quicker and warmer.

She felt the weight of his attention and she looked at him, her eyes bright and the heat of this room coloring her softly modelled cheeks.

She smiled. "A penny for your thoughts, Mister."

Clark grinned at her. "Never mind," he said, and pulled his chair up to the table.

After the meal, he loaded the hay, then made a tour of the place, attending to innumerable small tasks that he had intended doing for a long time.

Ellen came out to the fence and leaned against it, said, "Not only a handsome man, but a smart one. Why this sudden energy?"

"A handsome fellow," Clark told her, gravely mocking, "has lots of chances. So he should always leave things fixed up at home, in case he decides to run away with a town-gal. Then he wouldn't have to worry about how his poor wife was getting along."

She said, "You'd have to run a long way, Clark, to keep me from finding you and taking you back—and scratching the woman's eyes out!"

He laughed and moved on to put a new rope on the well-sweep, not wanting to stop and talk to her lest her deep understanding discover something of his secret.

Ellen went back to the house and came out again, carrying Susan. She called Capitan and with Neal following her, walked beyond the wheat field, waiting while the dog brought in two milch cows.

Clark took advantage of that interval to go into the house and get his gunbelt from a closet and take it out to the barn.

He lifted the revolver from the holster, feeling its weight and balance. Some almost forgotten wildness tugged at him and swung him back to the day when he had drifted into Sahwave, a restless youngster without purpose or particular destination.

Upon that street he had passed Ellen, a small, dark-haired girl in a pink gingham dress, sitting in her father's wagon outside the Emporium. An intuitive wisdom had touched Clark with the instant knowledge that, for him, there had never been—and never would be—another girl like this. When he turned his horse and rode back, Ellen had smiled at him . . . yes, it had been a long time since he had worn this gun.

Carefully he cleaned the weapon and re-loaded it; he worked softness into the stiffened holster and slipped the gun in and out of it experimentally. Then he wrapped the belt around the holster and folded it inside a saddle-blanket, concealing this in the load of hay.

TWILIGHT painted the colors of the valley gray beneath fading sun's reflection. Ellen was inside the house now and smoke rose from the kitchen flue; a lighted lamp etched out the windows in squares of pale yellow.

The children were in the yard and Clark joined them and played with them for a while. Letting them roll him about on the porch, he thought that times like these were to be remembered, for soon the kids would be grown up and past such things. . . .

When Ellen called out, "Supper," Clark went to the kitchen with one child under each arm, both of them kicking, laughing and squealing.

Ellen regarded them with mock severity. "Outside and wash—all three—or I'll call in the pigs to sit at the table with you."

Supper over, dishes washed, darkness

pressed close about the house and chill of night was beginning to make itself felt. But in this room there was warmth and the soft shine of lamplight.

Susan curled up on her mother's lap and Neal, in his long nightgown, stood at her knee. Clark got the Bible and brought it to her, taking his seat and watching her turn the pages.

She found her place and began to read and Clark listened attentively, seeing the sweet, grave set of her features and wondering, in spite of himself, if this was to be the last time he would hear her read to their children.

Presently Susan slept and Neal leaned heavily against Ellen's knee. Clark lifted the boy and together he and Ellen went up to the front of the house and put the children to bed.

She joined Clark on the porch and they stood there, listening to the small noises that touched and echoed against the edge of the night.

She began to hum a gay little tune and Clark said, "Happy, Ellen?"

She put her fingers on his arm. "It's the wind. I'm always happy when it blows in from the south—if I can reach out my hand and touch you."

Next morning, when dawn first showed against the summits eastward, Clark dressed and stood for a while, looking at sleeping children, before going out to the early breakfast Ellen had prepared for him.

Telling her good-bye, he held her in his arms so long that some part of her mind touched against his.

She said, intuitively, "Is there something wrong, dear?"

He said, "No, of course not." And turned away to the barn.

HE DROVE across the flats and at the crest of the ridge, he stopped and looked back at the valley, soft with the mists of early morning upon it still. A long time he looked, and the thought came to him that the course of a life is not to be measured in days or years, for time may fly so swiftly that a whole lifetime blurs into a single bright memory. While moments such as this could pile up their anxieties until even so brief an interval became eternity.

He reached into the hay and took out his gunbelt and buckled it on, then spoke to the horses and drove on over the ridge.

Sahwave was beginning to stir with this day's activities as Clark unloaded his hay and stabled his team.

Wagons and saddle ponies began to come in and soon there was a crowd on the street. Hal Harmon left Carmichael's Restaurant with the lawyer who was to defend his son, and went down to the jail; presently Judge Hedgepeth and Tom Lyons, the state's attorney, came out of the hotel and walked to the court house. The judge looked neither to the right nor left, completely indifferent to Sahwave and to its people.

The H-and-a-Half riders arrived in a tight bunch, leaving their horses at the Buckhorn rack and following Ben Cowan through the batwing doors. After a while, they came out of the saloon, one or two at a time, and infiltrated into the crowd.

Clark met one of them, Joe Reneger, in front of Melton's Hardware and the man's eyebrows raised at Clark's gunbelt. Then he wheeled and crossed the street to where another H-and-a-Half rider leaned against the corner of Preen's Stable.

Clark moved on to the Buckhorn and ordered a drink, evincing no interest when Reneger and the other rider came in and lined up beside him at the bar.

Reneger said, "One gun against twenty don't make much sense."

Clark centered his attention on the back-bar mirror. "Maybe it will be one against two, then one—or none—against the other eighteen."

The unexpectedness of this stiffened the two men, and Clark turned slowly to face them.

Reneger put his glass down carefully and the other man waited just as he was. About them was a general exodus from the bar, then through the room all talk and movement stopped. Outside noises became magnified and at the end of the street, the courthouse clock beat out nine measured strokes.

Impatience pushed Clark and he said, "Nerve don't grow; waiting on it never made it any bigger."

Thus the matter would have been forced, if Ben Cowan had not shoved

through the doors and spoken to the H-and-a-Half men sharply:

"What the hell's riding you fellows? Longstreet's our friend. Besides," he added, "it would make Fred's case look pretty bad if something happened to the main witness just before trial."

The two men stepped back, leaving Clark and Ben Cowan standing there.

Cowan said evenly, "Have a drink, Clark?"

Just as smoothly, Clark said, "No, thanks," and walked out to the street and down to the court house.

THE selection of the jury took all morning and it was mid-afternoon when the sheriff called Clark's name.

Fred Harmon, the prisoner, sat at a table with his father and his lawyer. Once in a while he cast a quick glance around the room, then went back to staring at the top of the table.

Clark was sworn in and took the stand, sitting there and looking down at the crowded courtroom.

"And chancing to be outside this open window," Lyons summed up, "you heard a shot. You looked into the back room of the Buckhorn—and saw what?"

Clark said, "Fred Harmon was standing in the middle of the room, with a smoking gun in his hand. Charlie Thompson was leaning against the wall, his hands up to his face and begging Fred not to shoot him again."

"And what did the defendant, Fred Harmon, do?"

"He shot Charlie again."

"The door leading from this back room to the main saloon was closed?"

"Yes."

"Was there anybody in the room except Fred Harmon and Charlie Thompson?"

"No."

Tom Lyons walked a step closer to Clark, turning and speaking so that everyone present could hear the next question: "Was Charlie Thompson armed—did he have a revolver in his hand or in his holster?"

Silence cut through the room in one quick, sure stroke and the sound of a man clearing his throat was loud against this sudden stillness.

Clark said, "No, Charlie Thompson was not armed. He was not wearing a gunbelt."

A little murmur ran through the room and Fred Harmon's head sank closer to the top of the table.

Tom Lyons turned to the defense counsel. "Your witness," he said.

The defense counsel studied Clark a moment, then asked a single question: "Would it have been possible, Mister Longstreet, for Charlie Thompson to have dropped his gun—that it was lying on the floor, beyond your range of vision?"

"It is a low window," Clark told him. "There wasn't any gun on the floor."

The lawyer said, "That will be all."

When Clark stepped down from the stand, he felt the weight of Hal Harmon's cold, unblinking stare. Going along the aisle, the eyes of the H-and-a-Half riders followed every step that he took.

AT THE door, Ben Cowan leaned against the wall, perfectly still and his face devoid of any expression.

As Clark passed, Cowan murmured, "We'll be out to see you some night, bucko. Real soon."

Clark paused, and his words did not carry beyond the H-and-a-Half foreman. "I'm taking it the quicker way, Ben. Now, if you want it."

Cowan's lips turned to a faint, satisfied smiling. "Stick around till the trial's over—if you're that big a fool."

Clark said, "I'm just that big a fool," and walked out of the room.

A group of H-and-a-Half men were at the entrance of Preen's Stable. Clark glanced at them, then turned away to the lower end of the court yard and took a seat there.

The stage from Vinton rolled in, stopped at the Wells-Fargo office and went on westward. Shadows lengthened and people began spilling out of the court house; a passing man said, "Adjourned until nine in the morning."

Clark saw H-and-a-Half men take their stands all along the street. Others saw it, too, and the crowd disintegrated quickly, people going their respective ways without loitering.

Oliver Preen strolled by. "I'm sorry

about this, Clark," he said. "I wish I could help you."

"That's all right, Oliver," Clark said.

Then Ben Cowan came down the middle of the street, walking with deliberate slowness, his challenging glance searching out Clark; his manner arrogant and unmistakable.

Clark got up and walked out to meet him, realizing the futility of his stand, but his mind steeled to a single, indomitable purpose.

Instantly he saw that they were not going to give him any chance at all.

HE SENSED that men were closing in behind him, and without moving his attention from Cowan, he saw Manuel Gorales leave the Buckhorn and angle across the street.

From the court house steps, the Sabine Kid came slouching along, his hat on the back of his head. The group at Preen's drifted forward, one man walking a little faster than the others. Sheriff Nicholson came out of the alley above the hardware store and instantly this group swung about and blocked him, surrounding him and holding him that way.

Westering sunlight shattered against tall peaks and shadows came racing over Sahwave. At the Buckhorn rack, a horse snorted and pulled back on its reins; somewhere a door slammed, and a little wind blew, stirred up the dust.

Ben Cowan stopped. Clark felt the hot pressure of this man's eyes and could see that he was smiling.

Cowan said, "I sure hope Fred Harmon is looking out a window, so that he can see this." Then Cowan swung up his gun with a smooth, practiced motion, but the urgent wildness in him drove him too fast and his bullet made a close whine past Clark's face. He swung his gun back, and that was when Clark's bullet caught him just below the heart. Cowan made a quick, jerky turn, the revolver dropped from his hand; then his knees buckled. He lay down, slowly and gently.

Clark whirled toward the Sabine Kid and was facing him when Hal Harmon came racing down the court house steps.

"Stop it," he shouted. "Stop it, I say."

As Clark and the Kid did not move or let their attention wander, Harmon ran on to stand between them.

"Fred broke down and confessed, boys," Harmon gasped. "He's asked the mercy of the court . . . Longstreet was telling the truth."

He motioned for the Kid to put his gun away, and Clark saw that the rancher's big shoulders were drooped and that he was sick with shame and disappointment.

"You only did your duty," he told Clark bitterly. "There'll be no trouble between you and the H-and-a-Half." He hesitated, then his voice came again: "I—I wish to God that I could have had a son like you!"

Abruptly then he started back toward the court house, his steps dragging a little: a man suddenly turned old because his destroyed pride had been so vital a part of him.

Clark stood on, just as he was. After a moment the Sabine Kid said, "All right, friend," and moved away.

Manuel Gorales went back to the Buckhorn, and the group holding Sheriff Nicholson came up and stood around Ben Cowan's body.

Whereupon Clark holstered his gun and exchanged glances with the sheriff. Nicholson nodded, and Clark walked to Preen's Stable, got his wagon and team and drove out of town.

If you like this story, you'll want to read more by the same author. Another powerful William Benton Johnston story of persecuted desert outcasts who sought sanctuary in a world that had marked them for death, may be found in this month's *Rangeland Romances!* Don't miss this great romantic novelette by William Benton Johnston—"Sweet Sue Fights for Love!" March *Rangeland Romances* now on sale!

AT Sweeten's Gap, he could see the lights of his own house making their bright and cheerful pattern against early darkness. He drove directly to the barn and put up his horses. At the yard gate Ellen was waiting.

Her voice came out to him, heavy with anxiety. "Is there anything wrong, Clark—did you have—have trouble?"

He said, very gently, "A little, but it's all right now." He went to her and took her in his arms, answering her questions softly, reassuringly.

He felt her body go rigid, then she relaxed and he held her like that.

Above them, the moon was full and its light lay on the benchlands like a silver mist. A small wind moved through the night and there was a scent of sage and wild rose; eastward the peaks of the Antelopes were tall black fingers reaching up at the stars.

Ellen stirred and turned her face toward the lower end of the valley. Then she turned to him.

"The wind is in the south again," she murmured.

Clark said, in a strangely choked voice, "Yes—yes it is." He turned, her hand still in his, and led her into the house....

FRONTIERSMEN WHO MADE HISTORY

from the notebook of CEDRIC·W·WINDAS

THOMAS · J · SMITH

In any list of tough frontier towns, three there are that jostle each other closely for first place:- Deadwood, Dodge .... and Abilene. If the latter needed taming (and it certainly did) there were many adventure-loving gents ready and willing to do the job. One by one they pinned a Marshal's badge to their vests; one by one they died. Abilene remained untamed till Thomas J. Smith took up the white man's burden.

Phil Coe and Big Ben Thompson ran a prosperous gambling joint in Abilene. Their luck was incredible until Marshal Thomas J. Smith discovered that Ben favored five aces to the deck, while his friend Phil had a quaint collection of loaded dice. They left Abilene in a hurry. When Hank Brady, Texas bad man, rode into town with the avowed ambition of killing the new marshal, Smith worked him over with his bony knuckles, and locked him in the hoosegow.

Smith's technique worked wonders among the dismayed gunmen of Abilene. When they tugged at their holsters he knocked 'em cold with a handful of fist. His fame spread so persistently that Wyoming Frank (whose gunslinging kept Cheyenne in an uproar) came with tied-down Colts to investigate the rumors. Badly battered, Frank returned to Cheyenne to report that marshal Smith was really good.

Abilene was delighted. Crooks and gunmen departed for more peaceful fields. Cowboys no longer thought it necessary to leave the town all shot up as a memento of a gorgeous time. Dating from marshal Smith's installation into office, citizens went about their business harmoniously and safely. ABILENE WAS TAMED! Then gunhawk McConnell killed a rancher, and Smith went to bring the murderer in. For the first (and last) time, the marshal's methods failed, for McConnell bushwacked him when the officer's back was turned. Thus died a gallant frontiersman who actually made history by taming a wild border town with his bare hands

• REFORMATION OF THE

The strangest partnership of the wild frontier was that of outlaw Dave Gambler and the Overland Kid—father and son—who made their last and most perilous play to rob the Westbound Flier of counterfeit currency. . . . Knowing that they must take their pay in a crooked banker's bushwhack lead!

CHAPTER ONE

Gun-Stop for the Westbound Flyer

RAIN drooled whisperingly in the dark stillness that held the tall Wyoming hills in its grip. The wind came only occasionally, and then in deep, gulpy breaths, its quick gusts sobbing in the high holes of the west wall of the canyon. As each gust passed on it left only the noise of the rain and the guarded sounds of the hoofs of two horses on the lonely and dangerously narrow little trail.

Midnight was almost at hand, and the clouds from the southwest were thickening. By the end of another hour, Parson Dave Gambler figured, the coming storm would be letting loose with a fury that would last until dawn. And that suited the plans of Dave and the Overland Kid right down to the ground, for every trail

TWO-MAN WILD BUNCH

Smashing Outlaw Novelette

By Tom Roan

Bunk Moore and Steve Good were blasted off their feet in the doorway of the saddle shop. . . .

of the high country would become hissing, frothing streams—good get-away weather.

Grizzled Parson Dave led the way, his tall, lean figure erect in his big bay's saddle and his keen eyes watching the darkness to read all the signs. The Overland Kid kept eyes and ears tuned to the darkness behind them. A slick-faced youth of twenty, born on the gun-trail from an outlaw mother and fathered by that man ahead of him, he had no doubts as to the outcome of the night's work.

"There she burns, son." Dave Gambler pulled rein at a bend in the trail where the canyon walls swung abruptly east and west, facing a long valley with a creek

beyond railroad tracks and rumpled little hills and rimrocked knolls beyond that.

The Kid drew up beside the older man and just to his left. Dave Gambler was pointing at a green switch light gleaming at them from the east.

"The end of the sidin', it is, though the sidin's rarely used. I've studied all the lay of things, as you'd know I would before I sent for you. Just 'round the bend is the telegraph shack. We've just about time to look things over as a final make-sure before the Westbound whistles for the board. You know what to do. Mind you, now, watch your shootin'."

"You don't need to tell me that each time!" A quick frown crossed the Overland Kid's cold and damp face. "Ride on. I'll take care of the telegraph shack."

"I know," nodded the older man with grave patience, "but you watch that telegraph operator. They say he's a cagey cuss an' liable to go for a gun."

"If he does," a thin smile flicked across the Overland Kid's handsome face as he stared intently at the green light in the rain, "I'll shoot it out of his hand."

"That's good, son. That's your ma in you. You ain't yet had to kill on a job, though you have done it elsewhere when jammed. All right," he thrust out his hand, "I reckon I'm plumb foolish to have doubts at times. Good luck, Johnny."

"Good luck, Dad!"

The Kid thrust out his hand. For about three seconds they sat there, wet hands gripped, grim smiles on their faces—father and son who had been through hell together so many times in the past.

Suddenly the hands relaxed, slipping almost reluctantly apart. Parson Dave Gambler rode on alone. Under his breath he was humming *Rocked in the Cradle of the Deep.*

THE telegraph office was a two-story shack on the north side of the tracks. The room below was used for oil and tools. An outside stairway led to the telegraph room.

The Overland Kid hoped those stairs would not squeak as he eased out of the wet bushes after leaving his tall black horse in a pine thicket north of the old water tank. The call of a night bird on the creek below the tracks had sounded the all clear signal to tell him to go ahead.

There was not much time left. Already the rails were making a faint humming sound. With the noiselessness of a prowling cat, the masked Kid moved on up the stairway, thoroughly confident as to what the outcome of his part would be.

He dropped to his knees on the upper landing and glanced cautiously around before peering through the keyhole at the burly, bushy-haired operator inside.

The first thing he noted was a big black Colt lying on the instrument board and within eighteen inches of the operator's right hand.

The Kid's hand stole to the door-knob, and, at that instant, a whistle blew in the distance, an infernally sad, long and deeply mournful wail to the night. The wet rails down there on the main line were beginning to pop now. The Westbound was coming fast, and the infernal door into the telegraph room was locked!

He slipped noiselessly back down the stairs with the headlight glare already beginning to show on the glistening hills. A frantic search followed until he stumbled upon an old keg that had once held railroad spikes. He hurried back with it.

The operator was evidently telegraphing Crown Point when the Kid mounted his shaking perch and looked through the window.

He waited until the operator locked his key, and then with one swift punch of the black muzzle of an ivory-butted .45 in his right hand, he smashed the pane.

"Steady, brother!" A shot roared from the Kid's big Colt even as he spoke, and the bullet drove straight to its mark. It sent the big black six-shooter from the instrument board to the floor. "I take no pleasure in killing! Move fast! Open that door!"

"What—what the hell!" gasped the operator, staring at the muzzle of the big Colt and the cold eyes watching him through slits in the black mask at the window. "What the hell's going on?"

THE KID drove him on to the door, made him open it, and then come out on the upper landing with his hands lifted.

"We're stabbing the Westbound Flier tonight. Come on! There's a dozen men out here." He eased off the keg, and

started backing down the stairs with the big operator following him.

Parson Dave appeared at that moment. In a few words the Kid told him of the big black Colt back there on the shack floor. Some of the train crew might find it and start to make trouble.

The older man sped away, darting up the stairs. A moment later the Kid glanced back and saw that his dad had set the semiphore on red to make certain that the Westbound would stop, though Black Rock was a regular stop for water.

Three minutes later the older man joined the Kid and his prisoner under the shadow of the water tank.

"All right, Choctaw!" Parson Dave Gambler grinned. Choctaw was the misleading name he always gave his son when on a job. "Let your rooster head for the creek an' keep on goin'. Don't stop, an' *don't* come back, mister, until the train pulls out. The rest of our boys will blow you full of lead if you turn back. Get goin', fella!"

That was the way to start a man, especially if he was so scared he was actually turning green. The operator bolted, running with his hands up and in terror of every shadowy bush.

A minute later, the Westbound Flier's ringing bell was drowning out all other sounds of the night, as the big locomotive came to a brake-chattering and air-hissing halt under the water tank.

THE fireman threw down his shovel on the steel apron of the cab, and started climbing back over the coal to pull down the iron spout of the water tank. The conductor had dropped off the forward end of one of the coaches and was going up in the telegraph room with a handful of papers. The engineer started swinging down from the cab with a long-spouted oil can in his hand. It was at that moment—right when it was least expected—that the fun began.

Shots awoke from the darkness, and with them came the yells as if a dozen men were popping out of the bushes at either side of the train, opening up with ruthless volleys to shoot down everything in sight. The engineer's feet had just touched the ground. They were big feet, but they were nimble.

The man dropped his oil can with a startled yell, and immediately headed for parts unknown. The fireman simply became a bird, going off the south side of the tender with a leap, and in a matter of seconds he plunged through the creek below the tracks and raced on for the safety of the rimrocked knolls.

"Let 'em go, boys!" bawled Parson Dave Gambler, making his voice reach every part of the train, as he shot and reloaded quickly. "They've got wives an' children at home! Hold your fire, Tracy, Jack, Sam, Wince, an' Bullet!" He fired twice more. "Stop that, Ben! Stop it, Bush! Bring up the dynamite, Hank, Choctaw, Peter! It's goin' to be too bad on the pore devil in the express car! Go ahead, Choctaw, light the dynamite fuse an' let's get it over fast! Buck, dammit, you didn't need to kill that man!"

There was an explosion under the express car at that moment that seemed to shake the entire train. Passengers in the rear coach must have thought that the express car had been blown into sky-high

wreckage. A giant Christmas cannon firecracker could make people think anything if their nerves had been prepared for it, and all nerves here were prepared. Parson Dave Gambler had simply lighted the big cracker and tossed it under the forward trucks.

"Wait! *Wait!*" The door of the express car opened at the south side of the train. A terrified express agent stood there with his hands lifted and eyes bulging. "I—I got—got—a family! Take—take what you want!"

"Open the other door so my men on that side of the train can come in!" yelled Parson Dave, again making every word roll clearly from one end of the train to the other. And the Kid backed his play by shooting into the air as his dad yelled. "Shoot any passenger who sticks his head out of a window, boys!"

The Kid fired six more shots on the north side of the train as the door of the express car on that side was being opened. He shuffled cartridges into his guns, and leaped into the car. In a matter of seconds he was having the express agent unlock the strong box.

When it was open, and the man inside had ducked through the door leading back into the coaches, the Overland Kid had the car to himself. The outlaw veteran outside kept up the shooting by darting back and forth under the car to send bullets whizzing along either side of the train and keep up the impression it was a mob at work instead of but two men.

MONEY! It was there, bag after fat canvas bag of currency—close to forty thousand dollars, if the tip-off had been correct. The Kid had come prepared. He opened some of the sacks and took a quick look to see that he was not being fooled, and then tied the bags together with small lengths of rope he had brought along from his saddle.

He was just swinging the bundles of bags across his shoulder, with half the bags to ride on his back and the other half to rest on his chest, when the door to the coaches swung open. A slender, pale-haired girl with wild blue eyes came darting in.

For a moment the Kid was startled. He swore under his breath. What was this girl, whom he'd been watching and hoping to meet for the past three days since he'd been in Lost Spur, doing here?

"Don't—please!" she cried, allowing the door to swing closed behind her. "It will ruin us! It is the payroll for Little Eldorado Mine in Lost Spur! The men will go mad! This is the second robbery in two months—!"

"There's insurance on this!" snapped the Kid, backing toward the door. "Don't think you're kidding us. The insurance will take care of your troubles."

"Insurance, yes," she cried bitterly. "But it takes months to collect it! And before then our mine will be taken over by McDood's bank in Lost Spur. Oh, *can't* you see? We must have this money. They'll foreclose in three days!"

She darted to him, and he caught her as her hands were sawing at the big six-shooters he had slipped back into their holsters. For a moment there was a quick struggle. The girl managed to free one of her hands. She reached up, slapping his face a furious blow.

The mask slipped a little to one side, and for two long seconds he was almost face to face with her and the girl's wild eyes staring at him.

"Some men," he growled, "would kill you for that. I'll take something else—something better."

He sawed her closer in a powerful embrace. His face lowered, eyes watching the door to the coaches. She was struggling when their lips met. She kept struggling, doing her best to kick him on the shins.

A second passed, another, another—three, four, five! His lips were still there as if glued to the girl's. Suddenly she was limp in his arms.

"There, now!" he cried, placing her in the express agent's big chair. "Thanks for the buggy ride, beautiful. I hope we meet again some time."

With that he turned and leaped out the door, the sacks of money over his shoulder and both six-shooters blazing in the rain, sending bullets slapping harmlessly along the side of the train.

"Hold them for twenty minutes, boys!" he yelled. "Make them stay inside the coaches. Don't waste any more lead unless you see something to shoot at!"

CHAPTER TWO

Blood Buys Worthless Loot

THE wind helped; it always did in a job like this. Howling gusts of it came through the trees and bushes like a tornado striking. The hoofs of the tall black and the bay made enough noise for a dozen wildly fleeing brutes as the father and son zig-zagged them through the brush. Noise and lots of it—the more the better now, to make the crowd back there think an army had struck, done its job, and was now pulling away.

It was not long before the scene of the hold-up was far behind them. Soon it was only the distant and almost tremulous wailing of the locomotive's whistle that they could hear, and they knew the conductor had screwed up enough courage to try to call the panic-stricken engineer and fireman back to their posts.

"Nice work, Johnny," complimented the older man when a chance came for him to speak. "I've always said two men are enough to stop a train where it's just the express car involved. They're tellin' 'emselves back there that all of a dozen men handled that job."

By this time the storm was coming down with a fury that was threatening to wash away all the slopes of the mountains. Parson Dave Gambler was still leading the way through the bitterly sluicing wet darkness. Suddenly he was swinging to the left, leading the way up a narrow ledge.

"You're going the wrong way, Dad," warned the Overland Kid when they struck a high, wind-swept rim. "We should keep straight on like we came!"

"Follow," ordered the older man, "an' just leave things to me, Johnny. I'm subject to quick changes on a job, as you know. There are a lot of things in this deal that you don't yet know about, and back there there were things I didn't like."

"There were things that I didn't like worth a damn, either, Dad!" frowned the Overland Kid when they pulled rein, high up under a giant overhang of rocks to breathe their horses. "There was one thing for certain, and I guess I'll have a long time forgetting it. I don't know what the hell came over me in the express car when that girl came in."

"I saw that," nodded Parson Dave, running his hands inside the bosom of his old slicker to dry them on his clothing before trying to roll a cigarette. "Yes, Johnny, I saw it all. A love bug bit suddenly, maybe. I've seen her eyein' you an' you eyein' her in Lost Spur for the whole three days you were there after I sent for you. I didn't tell you, but she's Tom Bell's daughter, an' Long Tom Bell owns the Little Eldorado. Her name, if I didn't miss it, is Nancy. Her daddy calls 'er Trixie. She'll know you the next time, Johnny. And that's goin' to be bad."

THE KID frowned, turning in his saddle and looked back at the rain-swept darkness, with the warmth of the girl's lips and the tear-wet face haunting him. "That's what hurts. I won't be able to go back into Lost Spur with you now. I'll have to keep burning timber and hills. I wish to hell you'd left me alone punching cows in Idaho. I liked that job—I always do—and I don't like this game, and you know I don't. I don't like it worth a damn!"

"Never did," agreed the older man. "You come by it honest, too, I reckon. It was the same with your mother, a month after I married her. It was just loyalty with her. Loyalty an' cold-steel nerve. She'd hold the horses in front of any damn' bank, in any kind of a gun-bust, no matter how thick the lead was flyin'. She never did quite forgive me for waitin' until the man she was goin' to marry was right at the church house door before I prodded 'im into a gun-fight an' killed 'im. She said I could have done it elsewhere. But now I reckon it doesn't matter. Open up a couple of those money sacks, Johnny. I'll hold a match."

"What's the matter with them?" demanded the Kid, looking at his father closely in the darkness as he swung the bags from his shoulder and placed them across his lap. "You haven't let me in on a lot of things in this deal, Dad."

"Didn't have time." Parson Dave grinned. "Couldn't be seen talkin' to you enough to give you the real low-down on a lot of things. Everything had to be done on the sly. Here, no match'll last in this wind. Just let me put my hand in that bag."

He slid the hand forward in the darkness. The Kid caught it, directing it into the mouth of one of the bags he had opened.

"As I expected," nodded the older man after a few moments. "I can tell by the feel—allus could tell. It's counterfeit, Johnny—every dollar of it! An' I ain't disappointed!"

"But—but—?"

"Why'd we do it, me knowin'?" Parson Dave Gambler grinned in the darkness. "Son, it's a long story just beginnin' to unfold. Jack McDood's owner of the Miner-Stockmen Bank in Lost Spur. He worked out this deal, playin' us both for a couple of suckers. He's also a big dog with the crook in the Iron Jaw Bank, eighty miles up the railroad where Nancy an' Long Tom Bell managed to get another loan.

"You an' me are to get a shade better than ten thousand extra when we meet certain folks at a certain place. McDood's to make it up, an' then we're supposed to go on our way—right into a couple of six-by-three holes in the ground.

"That answers the reason, doesn't it, for me swingin' off the trail we were supposed to ride? I don't like bein' double-crossed, an' shot in the dark, Johnny. It sometimes makes me mad as hell." He was silent for a moment.

"Well," he was suddenly swinging off his bay to begin untying an oil-skinned bundle from behind his saddle, "I reckon we might as well change clothes here before we push on. There's a lot to tell you later, but there'll be fightin' to do before long, an' not much time for talk until it's done. If we happen to get shot, we want the bullet holes in the right clothes, an' not in these we robbed the train in. That's why we're changin'."

TWO miles farther on they swung back toward the rim of the original narrow and high-walled canyon they had followed down to the telegraph shack. The storm was still hurling down, as though a dozen giant fire hoses were being turned upon them. In this weather no posse would be able to tell which way the hold-up men had gone. Besides, no posse could be rushed to the scene of the robbery before daylight. A switch-engine crew would have to be rushed to Crown Point from Jarret Bend, eighty miles away, and then there would be the thirty-mile run on to the scene of the hold-up.

Rough country in these high hills made travel almost a nightmare. The telegraph shack was less than fifteen miles from Lost Spur, and yet if one reached it by stage and train he would have to travel more than fifty miles.

"Right up here's another dry place to leave the horses for a spell." Parson Dave Gambler turned when they were near the canyon rim, and led the way on to another high wall of bluffs with a huge, cave-like opening in the side of it. "McDood's gun-dogs saw us go down that canyon tonight. Watchers are there now waitin' for us with cocked guns in the dark." He chuckled grimly. "I hate to disappoint people when they just can't help thinkin' they're makin' a plain, ordinary pet monkey out of me."

They were soon going on, leaving their horses behind them to wait in the dry. Lightning flashed and came crackling around them when they were on the rim of the canyon. Parson Dave Gambler swore. He did not like that business, and yet it showed him the dangerous wild animal trail he was looking for.

In a few moments more they were on it, carefully making their way downward toward roaring water sweeping along the floor of the canyon in a raging flood.

Then a lull in the wind brought a guarded voice to them when they were just above a broad ledge trail.

"Put out that cigarette, Charley," growled the voice. "They'll be here any time now."

"Not if I know anything about kickin' over a train," replied a second voice. "An' countin' jobs in the past I must know a thing or two. It'll take 'em time. I figure they'll cut the engine an' the express car loose, runnin' 'em off down the track about a mile or two, to—*Damn!*" The man's voice jumped to a jerk of alarm. "What's the matter!"

"Let 'em have it, Choctaw!" answered the bellowing voice of Parson Dave Gambler. "Cut 'em all down!"

In the lightning flashes, four men were outlined in the rocks just above a place where unsuspecting men on horseback

would have to pass on the ledge and be targets no gunmen could miss. One of the men had a cigarette cupped in his hand. It went out in a flutter of sparks bouncing on the rocks, and the sudden, furious thunder of shots roared out the noise of the storm.

"Get 'em fast, Choctaw!" Parson Dave Gambler had dropped to his knees, big guns roaring, his son right there just behind him and his guns flashing. "I promised a certain man we'd get them all."

Three men went down as if dropped in a pile by enormous charges of buckshot. The fourth man plunged to his hands and knees. He was trying to get up again when Parson Dave's bullets sent him plunging over the ledge to the rushing and roaring water below.

"An' that ends that!" cried Parson Dave, rolling the dead men off the ledge. "That was Buck Tracy, Sam Flack, Ben Yawl, an' Peter Jodey. It was why I was yellin' their names back there at the job. I heard them plottin' what they was goin' to do to us. They didn't figure, I reckon, that I'd be slippin' around McDood's house at night to find a good place to listen. Their horses will be waitin' just a shade farther on. I 'specially want Buck Tracy's saddle bags. Everybody in Lost Spur knows 'em. They'll look good full of that funny money."

"You see, Johnny," he turned and slapped his son on the shoulder, "I've been thinkin' about a lot of things since we separated. I know you liked the straight an' narrow trail. I laid off to give you time to think it over—an' consarn my old hide if I didn't get to sorter likin' the tame an' peaceful life!"

"And that," nodded the Overland Kid, "was what you meant when you said it was to be the very last job? All outlaws have said that same thing—"

"Then went back to it, yes." Parson Dave Gambler chuckled. "I've said it an' gone back, but did I say it with a keen, clear mind like I've got in my head now? No, Johnny, I didn't. You may think I'm plumb loco, but I've come to like bein' tame. But there's time to talk on the trail. We're through here."

He glanced over the ledge to the dangerous water below when the lightning flashed again. "That water'll just about take them to the scene of the job. The money problem will be washed up in its own little way. They wanted that counterfeit, thought—bad. Didn't want me livin' with it. It would have looked sorter irregular for a bank to be passin' out such stuff. But we can talk as we ride."

CHAPTER THREE

Hell Rides to Lost Spur

THE little telegraph office in Lost Spur did not open until seven o'clock in the morning. With more than twenty miles of rough stage trail between that high mountain town and Crown Point—and no one traveling the trail in such weather and at such a time of night—there was no opportunity for the news of the robbery to come through until the office in Lone Spur opened its doors.

It was exceedingly convenient all the way around. With the storm clouds let up and the sun breaking through, there was a gleam of satisfaction in Jack McDood's face as he walked down the west side of the street just before eight o'clock.

He was a tall man of fifty, lean, yet handsome in a cold, arrogant way, and dressed as a small town banker—neat and flawless. No one among the thoroughly respectable in all Lost Spur suspected that he carried a revolver under each armpit.

Lost Spur had the news of the robbery by this time. The saloons at either side of the street were teeming with the early morning crowds. Credit for the miners who worked Long Tom Bell's Little Eldorado had been shut off for more than two weeks. But, by a miracle of unbelievable sympathy, it had been restored in the Texas Cowboy Saloon on the west side of the street and across from the bank, where men were drinking.

The news had gone to every quarter of the town. For the second time in two months there was to be no pay-day for the hard-working and hard-drinking men who dug silver and its sprinkling of gold for Long Tom Bell.

"It looks like the Little Eldorado hold-up gangs are getting mean fast." Big Jim Butler, a dark-bearded, neatly-dressed gunman of forty, had brought McDood the news at seven-thirty to the back door

of the fine log house on the knoll at the head of the town. "I passed the word for the Hardrock Miner's Friend and the Cowboy's Square Deal to get sympathetic and start setting out the hard liquor."

"But no free stuff," had warned McDood. "Just sky-the-limit credit. It wants to look damned real this time, Jim, when Sheriff Bob Jackson comes storming in from Crown Point."

"It already looks damned real," grinned the gunman. "The sheriff of Crown Point was tappin' the wires the moment Dink Burrell opened the door to the telegraph office. Seems the Crown Point law was right excited about the train-robbery, an' wanted to git in touch with Long Tom Bell. But just as Long Tom got news that the train had been robbed, he lit out fast."

McDood carefully placed the beaver hat on his head and chewed thoughtfully on an unlighted cigar. "Mebbe he don't want to face his miners when they don't git paid for the second time," he grinned. "An' after the boys have sopped up enough of that red-eye on credit, can't say that I'd blame him none," he told Big Jim Butler as they walked down toward the bank.

And indeed as they reached the business section of town, it seemed as if his diagnosis had come true. Miners, already having taken aboard a number of drinks —through the generosity of Jack McDood's trust—were milling in the street, a muttering, cursing, ugly crew.

Nor did it help sooth their tempers any when Big Jim Butler stood before them, after a covert wink at Jack McDood, and bellowed the news that Long Tom Bell—having received news of the second robbery—had apparently taken wings and fled the country.

It was the flash to the fire already trying to flame. But the more he thought about it, the more McDood was puzzled by it. He went on inside the bank with a frown on his face. On Saturdays the bank never opened for business until nine.

He closed the front door and locked it behind him, and moved on to his office in the rear corner of the one-story brick building to plop himself in his chair behind his desk.

Was it true? Had Long Tom Bell got scared and started to run for it? No, hell, no! That was impossible. The fool would soon have the insurance check from the last robbery. Twenty-two thousand dollars there, and he would at least wait for that.

This time Bell had six trusted guards in Crown Point to ride herd on the stage. There would also be Old Joe Rice, the stage driver, another friend of Long Tom Bell's, and a dangerous man with a gun.

There was something wrong. McDood gingerly plucked up a little corner of the shade over the rear window of his office, and peeped out.

So far, there had been no report from Buck Tracy, Sam Flack, Ben Yawl, and Peter Jodey. But those men would not fail. They had never failed, because any man who failed Jack McDood died with his boots on. The boys were simply careful. In due time they would be on hand with the bogus money, and the two who had been dupes would be dead and covered under a rock pile somewhere.

Jack McDood took a drink from a bottle in the drawer of his desk, and tried to keep cool. Drinking in the early morning was not a habit of his. A banker did not want old church-going women and string-haltered deacons smelling whiskey on his breath. But the drink helped, and he took another. For some reason he was as nervous as hell!

He took two at once when the stage from Crown Point rattled in at eight-twenty, twenty minutes late. Nancy Bell was the only passenger, and the six horseback guards were there looking like a gang ready for anything. McDood took careful pains that no one saw him as he peeped out the window.

"An' we ain't to be paid agin!" The crowd was after the girl, a swarming and yapping pack, the moment she stepped foot to ground. "Another robbery—this time a train robbery—comin' right on top of—"

"Quiet, please!" The girl held up her left hand. In her right hand was the big black bag she had had with her when she left Lone Spur. "It was all a mistake! I was so excited I forgot. The money the bandits thought they took from the express car was only paper stuffed in bags. I have the pay-roll right here. Listen: At eleven o'clock the pay window will open! Every man will receive every dime

he has coming! The Little Eldorado pays off before noon!"

"Wha-aa-aa-at!"

THAT long exclamation came from a score of throats and sounded as if a plank was being slowly ripped from the side of a house. Questions roared up, jumbling, everybody talking at once. Drunken miners coming out of saloons to start a fight were stopped in their tracks. Bullying scowls and brute leers turned to a look of amazement, then understanding, and suddenly a cheer was going up.

"Bully for the gal!" "Three cheers for Miss Trixie! Three cheers for Tom Bell!"

It was bedlam out there now, and McDood hastily clawed out his bottle again. Hell, this couldn't be! Those two fools who had been told to rob the train would not have come away without the money they risked their necks for.

McDood knew Parson Dave Gambler, and he knew of the Overland Kid. He had known Dave Gambler twelve years ago as the Psalm-Singing Bandit. It was the only name the law had for the man anywhere. Without that Psalm-Singing Bandit monicker attached to him, no lawman would know Parson Dave Gambler as anything but a quiet, soft-spoken man who always made it a point carefully and strictly to mind his own business.

"And he knows me," muttered McDood with the whiskey beginning to take effect. "Ten thousand I could collect on him—but then, there'd be twenty thousand good dollars that he could collect on *my* head!"

A gentle but firm tapping on the back door brought him to his feet. He moved to it, and cracked it open—and his face turned the faded-yellow color of old parchment.

Parson Dave Gambler and the Overland Kid stood there, the Kid in front and Parson Dave just behind him. Over the Overland Kid's left shoulder hung a pair of big saddle bags. McDood's startled eyes did not need a second glance to tell him that those saddle bags belonged to Buck Tracy.

"Howdy!" said the Overland Kid with a cigarette dangling in the right side of his mouth and a funny little smile on his face. "You haven't seen a ghost have you?"

"You?" McDood's voice was a breathless croak. *"You two?* Good God, there's been some mistake!"

"Sure," chuckled Parson Dave, "it was one big mistake. We're alive, an' your gun-pups are dead. Watch his hands, son. He's apt to go for a pop-pistol under his arm-pits. We've come to swap some funny money for the real thing, Mister McDood. You know damn' well that ain't what they called you in Texas!"

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McDOOD swore, but he opened the vault and started handing out the cash. Moisture was in his eyes when he came to twenty thousand dollars. He wept scalding tears when the count reached thirty, and sobbed like a spoiled baby when it came to thirty-nine, five-hundred.

"The poor little thing wanted forty-two, ninety-five to pay off in full." Parson Dave shook his head sadly. "They cut her down some. But," he shook back his shoulders, "you was to make it fifty thousand flat, an' that'll more'n take care of the double pay-roll."

"What!"

"Quiet," ordered Parson Dave. "We're callin' the tune now. You tried to make a fool out of us when you thought you were forcin' us to rob that train. Now do you want the whole town to know you're crooked, Mister Shark Finn, of Texas?

"Get the ten, five hundred to make up the fifty thousand. While you're at it, bring those papers you hold agin' the Little Eldorado. Mark them Paid in Full. Hurry. I'm liable to get mad as hell if you monkey with me much longer."

McDood moved like a man in a daze. Both these men would kill. In cold terror he brought everything, and then watched them back away to the door.

"Just one thing more," added Parson Dave. "I never told you that Bob Jackson, the sheriff of Crown Point, is a half brother of mine. I promised Bob I'd be good when I came up here, so to sort of reassure him, the Kid and I dropped in on him directly after we met your gun-dogs. Seemed that we got there just about the time that Long Tom's daughter arrived on her way here, plumb heart-broke account the robbery. But Bob Jackson took my word about just what happened. . . .

"Well, Shark, Long Tom got confidential news last night here that the insurance money on the previous robbery was coming through Crown Point this mornin', so he done met us there too. . . ."

Parson Dave's mild blue eyes twinkled. "Seemed like quite a fambly reunion, almost. With the insurance check, plus what Bob could raise from the bank there, plus what some of his friends chipped in, we made up the pay-roll, and Nancy Bell took the stage back, with the money guarded, an' my boy here ridin' behind, sorta coverin' the rear. Wouldn't be surprised if Long Tom's back in town right this minute. . . .

McDood's jaw dropped; his face becoming crimson and deathly white by turns. His mouth opened, then closed, then opened again. But the only noise he could make was an inane gurgle somewhere deep down behind his tonsils.

"Yeah, Shark," Parson Dave continued calmly. "My boy's plumb in love with that little girl. We aim to settle down here an' be somebody. Good luck, Shark. We'll be lookin' for more of your gun-pups!"

NINE o'clock came. On Saturdays the bank would be open until noon, just like the big town banks. The cashier arrived. Business was as usual, but McDood paced the floor.

At exactly eleven o'clock, the Little Eldorado was paying off with the Overland Kid beside the beautiful little Nancy Bell and Parson Dave sitting in the corner watching. McDood heard all about it and still paced the floor of his office. His gunmen had been in and out. God, this thing meant he was ruined!

"Get them!" he had ordered, snarling at Big Jim Butler, and driven to it at last by a thousand fears. "Put all the gang out for them and shoot them dead! Don't leave them alive long enough to talk. It's the only thing to save us!

"They brought in Tracy's saddle bags. They didn't even give me that phoney money back. Know what they'll do? They'll make the Iron Jaw Bank take it back, because it's in Iron Jaw Bank bags. The bank had to make all things look regular. They'll saddle this whole thing on me, through Tracy. We can't let them get away with this. If we do, I tell you, we're ruined! All because you fools were afraid to rob a train!"

"He hasn't told Bob Jackson who I am. It's not his way. That will be his hole card to hold over my head. This is one time my smartness has struck a snag, because that Psalm-Singing Bandit didn't want to do this. Damn it, that fool actually wants to go straight—and it looks like he's going to do it!"

It was over at just a quarter after twelve. Every man employed by Tom Bell had received his money, and every man was happy and swearing his loyal utmost to Long Tom again, but there was a strange tension over Lone Spur in spite of it all.

BY ONE o'clock Lost Spur was waiting for the blood, and knowing that the strange parson man and his son were going to be on the receiving end of trouble. Somehow those two had saved the day for the Little Eldorado.

Every Little Eldorado miner had come to that conclusion. Those of the rougher element had also come to the conclusion that McDood was at last going to be forced into the open to shock the churchgoers he had so long fooled.

Long Tom Bell and his daughter came down the street just before one. Both were nervous, and the girl kept looking

back toward the Little Eldorado. Once it was certain that she was about to turn back, but her father took her arm.

"That gal's scared," whispered a miner, "an' she's been cryin', too. I don't know what to make of all this, Alec. There's somethin' damn' mean in the wind. Look down yonder. There's Big Jim Butler leanin' agin a corner of the bank like a half-asleep lizard. There's Tom Payne hangin' about the front door of the blacksmith shop. Ike Ginley's a little further down, standin' in the door of the gunsmith's. He went in there almost an hour ago with a Winchester. Then there's the three Hatton boys in the hallway of the livery stable, an' Bunk Moore an' Steve Good in the doorway of the saddle store. I think it's time we got off the street."

"It's what I'm thinkin'," nodded the second miner when he had a chance to speak. "Yuh notice, I reckon, that ever' cowboy in town has sorter quiet-like removed his hoss from this hitchrack an' that, an' there ain't a hoss left on the street. Me, I'm goin' home to my wife an' kids."

"A good idea!" agreed the first speaker. "I was in the Texas Cowboy. Rube Colter an' Jack Pard are there among the others. The way they looked at me—well, I didn't like it. Let's go!"

CHAPTER FOUR

Gunsmoke End for the Owlhoot Legion

THE tension was worse in Long Tom Bell's big house on a knoll above the little creek at the lower end of town. Nancy Bell and her mother paced the floor with all thoughts of an already-late lunch forgotten. Old Mary, the Sioux squaw who presided over the kitchen, had ceased calling them.

Something had come over Old Mary, and sent her to a chair in her favorite corner near the stove. Her old Lame Wolf and Long Tom Bell were upstairs cleaning a pair of Winchesters and a regular pile of six-shooters lying on a table.

The girl went from window to window to look out and up Lost Spur's main street. "Oh, it's coming! It's coming! Dad says it's the only way to drive all the wolves out of this town."

She kept pacing, burning with memories, a memory of that face in the express car, and of those lips glued to hers. It had left her speechless all the way from Black Rock to Crown Point, where Sheriff Jackson met the train.

"Whatever you're thinkin'," the old sheriff had quietly warned, "you keep it to yourself, Nancy. I'm bankin' my star on things. If I lose I'm liable to be in deeper water than I can swim out of. You take the stage back to Lost Spur. . . ."

And now those two men who had saved the Little Eldorado mine might even be dead before another hour.

"And if *he* dies," the girl told herself, her thoughts flying, the haunting memory of a last kiss up there in the rear office of the mines still going through her mind, "I'll die. Mother! Dad!" Her voice lifted to almost a shriek. "They're coming! They're leaving the office! *He's* coming first!"

The Overland Kid had appeared up there on the mine office porch with a pump shotgun cradled across his left arm. From the distance the girl could see that his shoulders were slightly drooped. The thumbs of his right hand were hooked over the broad buckles of his belts. A cigarette hung in the corner of his mouth, and his big hat sat at a don't-give-a-damn angle on the side of his head.

"No! no!" The girl was becoming hysterical a few moments later. "He can't! He's going it alone! Where is his father? Mother, they—they can't! Stop him, Dad! This is murder!"

"Stop that, yourself, Trixie!" Long Tom Bell had appeared on the stairs with big .45's at his hips in their sagging cartridge belts and a Winchester cradled across his arm. "We're doing as we promised. You know what kind of a crack shot Lame Wolf is, and I'm not rated so bad, myself. We're taking a hand in this thing from windows upstairs."

THE Overland Kid was taking his time and watching all angles of the game as he strolled slowly down the street. A man in his boots had to let the other side start the fight. It would be the last fight he would ever have to make. That was the hope that kept going through the Kid's mind.

Cowpunching or even working around

a mine for an honest living would beat the past, and this was the big chance to lay aside all old scores and to step forth on another and brighter road—if a man could come through alive. . . .

He saw a big man turn away from the corner of the bank. That was Big Jim Butler, Lost Spur's fastest gunman.

The Kid saw him light a cigarette and hook his thumbs over the buckles of his belts as he turned up the street, walking slowly, acting like a man loafing somewhere with no care of how long it would take him to get there.

It was the first mistake. Big Jim Butler was just a shade too casual for the bloodlessly pale color of his face.

Butler was the one to start the fight, that was clear. He would make the first play, opening up, and he would expect his man to stop dead-still in his tracks to go for his guns. That dead-still stop would be disastrous, for the Kid could already feel that he was being covered with guns from a dozen places.

Hidden gunmen, he guessed, were wondering what had become of Parson Dave, but they would not know about that until the time came. For the Kid had not been the first one to leave the mine office.

Even as he was standing up there on the porch, he had been stalling, giving his father time to slip out the back door, crawl through the grass and weeds to a little ravine that would lead him down to the foot of the town's main street. Parson Dave was already in place—and this hell would be a two-sided hell when the fireworks were once started.

"Hello, tinhorn!" Butler was wasting no time when he came within speaking distance. "I hear you're championing Tom Bell in order to play up to that girl of his. Do you know what I call her, the damned little—"

"Far enough, Butler!" The Kid leaped to the right, then back to the left. "Let's get it done, you damned snake!"

The Overland Kid's right hand had darted downward. The six-shooter at this side of his hips did not leave its long holster, as the muzzle tilted upward, spewing flame.

Big Jim Butler died right there in his tracks. Two bullets tore off the top of his head and sent him plunging to the ground with a six-shooter still in his hand.

It was the signal for hell to open up.

THE Kid did not wait. He was like a wildly pitching and swaying jumping-jack in the street, here, there and everywhere, and never in the same place an instant.

He let go with his shotgun, firing two wicked blasts, and Bunk Moore and Steve Good, who had clawed for their guns, were off their feet in the doorway of the saddle store.

Lost Spur roared with it after that. Men were blazing away at that leaping, ducking and darting thing in the street, the bullets spurting up the dust all around him. He took up the street, bouncing this way and that, shooting while jumping, shooting while his feet were coming down to contact earth again.

Rube Colter and Jack Pard folded up and died in the doorway of the Texas Cowboy Saloon. At the moment they died it was Parson Dave Gambler who came darting in at the back door of the Texas Cowboy with an infernal shotgun, and the two big bartenders behind the bar died in their tracks, with faces and chests torn off by buckshot before they could wheel and snatch up six-shooters.

Shots were pouring from the upper windows of Long Tom Bell's house. That house commanded the street and the shooting was furious, but no one noticed it. Men not in the fight were seeking cover under tables and behind counters where they could be found—and that jumping-jack was still in command of the street, his six-shooters downing a man at every shot.

He went to his knees shooting it out with the three Hattons in the doorway of the livery stable. Then, rocking up and beginning to weave a little drunkenly, he was firing at the deadly Tom Payne in the doorway of the blacksmith shop when he was again downed to his hands and knees. He came up for the second time with blood filling his eyes and his head singing.

Parson Dave Gambler appeared at that moment after tearing hell itself out of the Texas Cowboy Saloon. All Psalm-Singing Bandit now, he was throwing lead right and left. He killed Ike Ginsley in

the doorway of the gunsmith's, then finished off Tom Payne who was trying to get up with one of the Overland Kid's slugs through his belly.

Somebody started to cheer. Miners who had never thought they would be in a gun-battle were suddenly taking part in it. By this time it seemed to the most of them that an hour had passed. As a matter of fact, the fight had not lasted four minutes.

It would have ended at once, but there was another man the miners had not reckoned on. . . .

He came out of the bank doorway with two six-shooters in his hands when Parson Dave Gambler turned to run up the street where his boy had gone down for the third time. It was Jack McDood, and the man was suddenly blazing away at the running Parson Dave. And that youthful figure in the dust was trying to get to his feet again.

Parson Dave Gambler must have had eyes in the back of his head. He whirled suddenly, and was going back toward the bank with a Colt roaring in each hand. He downed McDood with the first two shots, but he was a wild man still going on, still shooting—an old, crying man now screeching something in a high-cracked voice about his boy.

"Let me alone, I say!" Parson Dave was shouting. "Just bring me a shotgun an' I'll finish tearin' 'im right on down through the ground! Straight on to hell! Let me alone. . . !"

WHEN Sheriff Bob Jackson rode in from Crown Point with a dozen men at his heels, it was an hour after the fight. He swung out of his big saddle in front of Long Tom Payne's house. "How did it end? Don't tell me it went wrong!"

"The young fella got it the worst, I reckon," answered a miner. "I think he was dead when they carried 'im inside the house. Among other places he was shot through the head. The old man don't seem bad hurt—"

Jackson waited to hear no more. He plunged on into the house, so pale and wild-eyed he might have been shot. He skidded and almost fell on a rug in the hall, and then swung into a lower floor bedroom to his right to come to a quick halt with his hat in his hand.

"Dave!" he cried. "Dave, did—did they get 'im?"

Parson Dave was sitting, stripped to the waist, in a chair. A doctor had finished work on the tall figure stretched full-length on the bed with Nancy Bell at one side and her mother at the other, while solemn Long Tom stood at the foot of the bed.

Parson Dave had a bullet wound high in his right shoulder. There was another in his forearm, and another hard scrape across the outer side of his right thigh.

"They got 'im, in a way, yes," Parson Dave was finally answering. "Maybe I went crazy, 'cause I thought the boy was a goner when I saw that blood on his head. It was a hard scrape through the scalp. They got him in the leg twice, too, but the doc says no bones busted an' he's comin' through."

A slow, hard grin worked its way across his face, "Just wait till he opens his eyes an' looks up at that purty face above 'im. It takes a lot, as you might know from the past, Bob," he winked, "to put a Gambler out of the race complete."

THE END

THE TRAIL AHEAD

That strange combination of saint and devil, Friar Robusto makes his most dangerous pilgrimage to roaring Jackass Bar—to collect from its red-shirted brawling miners a fortune in honest, untainted gold! You'll want to read this great novelette—"Friar Robusto's Gold-Camp Pilgrimage" by Harry F. Olmsted, in the April issue. Also a smashing lead novel by Walt Coburn of the Montana cattle frontier, plus novelettes by Cliff Farrell, Dee Linford—and others!

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• LAST DRIVE OF THE

In the billowing dust and sweat of the thundering Eye-Bar-O trail drive, young Terry Glenn, Texas greenhorn, learned that even a tough trailman like Hay Carruthers is no match—alone—for a trail-crew bent on mutiny and murder!

Terry fired off-hand, and Gate went down. . . .

LONGHORN MUTINEERS

A great hell-town novelette, by

William R. Cox

CHAPTER ONE

Blood Barricade on the Longhorn Trail

IN the border town of Chronopolis young Terry Glenn dealt faro with his Colts in his lap and the bowie knife of his dead father strung in a lanyard between his shoulder blades.

It was wild, new country, tough as the cowmen could make it, and the blood of a young man ran very swift. Peg Bottome, bald, short and one-legged since Bull Run, was Yankee-wise, investing more and more money in cattle, money which came over the bar and tables of the Blood Bucket.

"Terry," he said, "in a few years we'll be able to retire rich. This bit o' cattle is nothin'. Wait. We'll be big people . . . ."

Terry said, "I'm sick of the gambling tables. I got to get out and move around. I'm a greenhorn. I never sweat out a

full day's work in all of my life!"

He was widening in the shoulders, but his hands were soft and white from the dealing. He said, "I can ride and rope. Hay Carruthers is taking a tough crew on the drive to Grant City. I'm goin' along with him."

"I wouldn't stop you, son," said Peg Bottome. "But you're crazy to go through it. That's a hell drive, up there. You don't need to . . . ."

"I know I don't," said Terry, "But you got cattle in with the Eye-Bar-O bunch. I'm gonna try and make myself tough. I want to be part of this country. Dealin' faro is all right—but it ain't enough."

"That Blackie Daw and his mob is plenty tough," said Peg.

"Hay Carruthers is tougher," said Terry. "I ain't worrying about danger. I can handle myself."

Peg Bottome knew that Terry could handle himself He had seen his gun flash; had been thankful for the quick work of that bowie. But he also knew the pull of the trail, the long trail to the north, where cattle were sold at huge profits, where the Texans were waxing rich through their untiring herding of the longhorns across prairie and stream.

He said, "Miz Holley will be worryin'. You know how we feel about you, boy. You're gettin' too restless."

Terry Glenn had felt his restlessness grow as the gamblers and desperadoes had come and gone in Chronopolis. There had been times when the gun had settled in his hand, when the urge to kill had been strong . . . . The trail would be hard, but that was the answer.

He had already bought the striped jeans, the shirt, the chaps. He had worked the new reata until it was soft and pliable. He was ashamed of his hands, so he bought a pair of buckskin gloves. In his belt was money enough.

He went home, and Miz Holley's sharp, gray eyes did not flicker.

She said, "I've seen it comin', boy. And I know you're right. It may be hard, but it's a man's job. Dealin' faro in that sink of iniquity . . . ."

She knew Peg Bottome for the salt of Texas, but she never spoke anything but ill of the stout man.

Terry grinned and said, "I'll be shovin' along, ma'am."

She kissed him once and there were no tears in her Spartan make-up, so she waved him away.

That was how young Terry Glenn rode the trail north, with Hay Carruthers, the hardest-bitten, softest-spoken driver of them all.

THERE was a river, and it had been raining. Young Terry's gloves were ripped to ribbons, but his hands were over the agony now. The end of the drive was in sight.

Hay Carruthers said, "We won't try it tonight, boys. It'll be lower in the mornin'."

There were four of them in Blackie Daw's crowd—Sandy Gate, Grab Wilkins, Rowel Peters and Gandy Corum. They were good hands, too, the best; partly because they were so reckless and fearless. They stood up to Hay. Now the town was beckoning; red-eye, dance-hall girls, brawls and gaming. They were too long on the trail to tarry.

Blackie Daw had a reputation. He would ride for no man who was not as tough as he. There were those who said Blackie had packed a running iron himself many a time—and for his own profit. And there had been a stage robbery about which people whispered. He was a giant of a man, with a mess of hair and beard and distaste for soap and water.

He said, "I know you ain't scared of nothin', Hay. But you're thinkin' too much of the owners. We don't stand to lose but a few cattle in that stream. The boys want to risk it."

Hay said, "I don't risk no man's life in boilin' water. You'll see town quick enough."

Blackie was courteous, but he argued. Young Terry sat his mustang, listening. He was learning, every day, about men alone, heroic in wind and storm, treasuring the cattle which would bring them their pay, but loyal above all else to their their outfit.

Tomorrow Blackie might be running off steers of the Eye-Bar-O, but today he would get them to market or die.

Yet here was another thing—the lusting of the cowhand for his fun. Hard fun,

rough fun, but they loved it beyond all things. Days and weeks on the drive, they had been planning for it, and another extra twenty-four hours seemed a year to them.

Hay Carruthers was a hard man, but a fair one. He said, "I know how the boys feel. But it's plumb dangerous."

Blackie said, "I know you ain't scared Hay. . . ."

Hay flushed. "That's twice you said that, Blackie. You wouldn't mean nothin' personal?"

Blackie said, "You know I don't mean to hooraw you, Hay. It's just that the water ain't that bad."

Young Terry looked again at the foam-flecked, bank-full river. It was worse than any they had yet forded. There was an angry hiss to it, and there was fresh mud at the edges, where it had been churned by the restless current.

Hay Carruthers was stooped of shoulder, but he was wide and tall and piercing of eye. He said, "We wait."

No one disputed him. The driver is boss of the trail herd. Blackie Daw's face was impossible to read, but the younger men were resentful, Terry thought. They made camp and the chuck wagon gave off the aroma of coffee.

It was Blackie and his men who rode guard that night. There were ten in the crew, and the remaining four were wont to ride with Hay. Terry, worn from his duties and a trick on the herd last night, folded up beside the fire and slept. Hay Carruthers sat cross-legged, rolling and smoking cigarettes as Terry dropped off to sleep.

Later there were voices, and Terry half-awakened. He thought he recognized Blackie's low but strident accents.

He heard Hay remark, "If you're looking for trouble with me, Blackie, you'll shore get it."

He tried to awaken fully, but his young body was completely exhausted, and anyway, the boss could take care of Blackie and a dozen like him. Hadn't Hay brought them all the way, safe and sound, without loss of a man or a horse, and with very few cattle lost? Through desert and across plain, over rivers and around the arid spots, and now on this short-cut to Grant City, at the end of the trail?

Blackie was trail-wise. He was a tough one, but he knew that he could not go too far without being blacklisted in every camp in the cattle country. Everyone knew Hay was a fair man. Blackie may have indulged in some extra-legal escapades, but the big man would have no idea of going bronc and joining up with the rustlers and renegades in the hills. Blackie was too smart for that.

So young Terry slept . . . .

AT dawn, the coffee and jerkey was redolent, but not so attractive as formerly, before he had eaten of it seven days a week, three times a day. He munched a biscuit and got stiffly about his work. That night would seem them in Grant, and he could order vegetables.

Hay Carruthers said, "Get the wagon ready to roll before you wake up Blackie and the boys."

Terry realized then with shame that he had been allowed to sleep through the watch, that the others had ridden herd while he snored.

He said, "You shouldn't of done it, Hay."

The hard-bitten driver scowled and said, "I plumb forgot you, kid. We didn't need you, anyway. Now jump on that cayuse and make sure we're ready to start. The river ain't safe yet, but I can't hold them no longer."

Hay was worried, all right. He was driving fifty thousand dollars' worth of beef on the hoof. He was responsible for every cent and pound of it, and the water certainly was rough. Terry went about his chores and when the sun was high, Blackie Daw and the others joined him.

Before the herd was started, Hay Carruthers rode to the water's edge. Blackie and his men said, "Here we go!" and rode furiously to the left, to house the herd into the narrow remnants of what had been a ford.

"I'm going in first," Carruthers said, "I've got to try it. It don't look safe to me."

He handed Terry an oil-skin-wrapped package. "There's the papers for the drive, son. Hold them till I try this . . . . Just a hunch, I reckon."

He brooded a moment, slumping in the saddle to which he had been almost born.

Then he raised one hand in a half-salute and zigged his mustang. The horse went delicately but unafraid into the water, slipping a little in the mud.

Terry sat staring. The thing had suddenly grown out of all proportion. In the rear the hands were whooping, urging the cattle, sending them into the river. Blackie and his men were out of sight now, around a slight bend in the river, but Terry could hear them.

Hay Carruthers rode to midstream. His horse wast strong, and swam well, but Hay was looking downstream, to where—if the cows could not make it here—there must be another landing for them.

Then Terry saw the onrushing log. It had a branch attached, and Terry saw it plainly. He yelled, "Hay! Look out!"

But Hay was still peering downstream, worrying about his precious charges, and the heavy cottonwood log seemed to pick up speed. It nudged the flank of Hay's horse. Hay saw his danger too late, and tried to get loose. The horse shrieked with pain, and there was a moment of red cloudiness in the stream.

Terry set spurs to his bronc. They were in the swift-moving current in a second. Hay and his mount were twisting in a sort of whirlpool now. For a moment it seemed that Hay would get loose. He leaned down and reached under water, but his spur was entangled in a cinch.

Terry was almost there. He yelled, "Get loose. I'll pick you up if you get loose."

He urged his own horse on. Hay came up straight out of the saddle, and the blood was plain now where the horse had been injured by the log. Terry shook out his rope. He had put the oilskin package in his saddle bag, and now he took time to make sure of it. His mind was working very clearly.

He had taken great pains with the grass reata. It was limber and in his hands a sure weapon. He made a small swing with the medium loop and let go.

The rope snaked out. It was almost over Hay's torso. Suddenly the boss threw up his hands. Even as Terry's rope fell, Hay went out of the saddle and under water. The horse sank for a second, and reappeared, shooting down in the increased current.

Hay never came up. The water boiled and the cattle came drumming along, splashing into the stream, the riders yelling, confusion over all.

TERRY turned the cayuse with little difficulty and swum him downstream. After a while they came to a place on the bank, and they scrambled out, soaked and shivering. He rode a mile or two farther down, scanning each bank, but there was no sight of Hay nor his horse.

Terry rode back. The herd had crossed and Blackie Daw was sitting in the saddle, waiting.

Sandy Gate, the little, old wry-neck trail-hand, was near-by.

Terry said. "Hay went down in the river."

"Yep," said Blackie.

"We oughta get him," said Terry. "We just can't ride off and leave Hay like that."

"No tellin' where he'll come up," said Blackie. "Them steers got to go to Grant."

Terry started to speak of the oil-skin packet, then he noted the sharp eyes of Sandy Gates probing at him, and something in Blackie's waiting attitude warned him.

He said, "Hay was a good man. I don't like this."

"None of us likes it," said Blackie. "Hay had the papers for the drive. The boys 'll have to wait for their pay. We got to get the drive in, kid. If you wanta look for Hay, whyn't you and Sandy try it. You can meet us in Grant."

Terry said, "I wouldn't like to leave him."

"Take Sandy," said Daw. "We'll be in by night. We'll look for you-all."

Sandy did not say anything. His eyes were small and black. He had Indian blood, they said, and Terry could believe it.

He did not like the eyes of Sandy Gates, prying into him.

The outfit was gone, harrying the cows toward town. He could go with them, consigning Hay Carruthers to the land and the water of his nativity—or he could go with Sandy Gates along the river bank.

He was very young, and this was new

to him—but he had dealt faro in Peg Bottome's Blood Bucket since he was sixteen.

He said, "All right. Let's go, Sandy."

Blackie Daw raised a hand and rode away. He was a giant of a man, and he rode a big, strapping bay horse, a blooded animal with heavy legs, a stayer rather than a runner.

CHAPTER TWO

Shot in the Back!

IT was funny, Terry reflected, how Blackie had changed just in that hour. Hay had been the boss, and Blackie was just a big, tough hand with whiskers. But now that Hay was dead there was no doubt about Blackie's leadership He would not have to seek it. It would be offered to him by every man in the trail-crew. Terry could feel the force of him, looking at his back, watching him ride away.

Sandy said, "C'mon, kid. Get goin'. I want to join the boys in Grant. There'll be hell to raise tomorrow night."

He had a voice like a rasp. He was an old-timer, a whiskey-soaking swaggerer with a quick sixgun, and an intimate of Blackie Daw.

They rode down the river again, and Terry wondered why Blackie had sent his lieutenant upon such a non-profitable errand. His ideas about Blackie were undergoing a change.

There was no sign of Hay Carruthers. The two had ridden miles down the river and Sandy Gates was grumbling.

Terry said, "You heard Blackie say to find him."

"Blackie didn't say no such of a thing," growled Gate, his black eyes were murky.

Terry said, "He meant for us to find him."

"Blackie don't give a damn about Carruthers, and you know it," said Sandy.

They were in a clearing, facing the river where it bent once more. Terry took his eyes from the fast-moving stream. "What do you mean, Sandy?"

"I mean I want them papers," said Sandy. He did not draw his gun, but his hand clawed out, hovering over the holster at his side. "Hay give them to you. I want them, pronto!"

Terry said. "What papers?"

He knew better than to try to draw. One of his hands was on the reins, the other too far from his gun. Sandy as good as had the drop on him—and he had seen the little badman kill a jack-rabbit with that six-shooter too many times.

"In your saddle-bag," said Sandy. "And no tricks, gambler. I know you and that bowie of yours."

No phase of the West, nor of cattle-work, called for so much courage or resourcefulness as did pushing a herd up the trail. You'll read about a different kind of trail drive in Cliff Farrell's next novelette—of a stolen herd and a youngster who came back from boothill to fight for it! Next issue on sale February 28th!

Terry said, "You got me, Sandy. But those papers are no good to you. They're just the ordinary drive business. There's no money in the package, or anything else of value."

"Hand 'em over," said Sandy grimly.

Terry was careful with his hand. He undid the flap and reached into the bag. It was while he was fumbling for the oil-skin packet that he realized suddenly that in another moment he would be dead.

It was in the air. The fierce, black eyes, the mien of the little man on the horse, maybe the fact that Sandy had not drawn a weapon, were part of it. A drawn six-gun was a bluff, but a holstered gun might come forth spitting lead. Terry knew about guns and gun-fighters. He had dealt cards to hundreds of them.

He said, "I don't see what you want with it, but here it is."

Sandy said, "Drop it on the ground, kid. No tricks!"

Terry opened his hand, letting the package fall. His own gaze, full upon the little man, detected no swerving of the black orbs prying at him. Sandy said, "Now git goin'. And don't ride to Grant. Remember that!"

Terry said, "But I haven't got any money, or anything."

He had money in his belt. He had a Colt in his holster. His fingers were itching, but there was nothing he could do.

HE tried to sound frightened, arguing with the surly tough hand. "You've got to give me a chance. I can't backtrail and get through back home. I got no friends this far north of Chronopolis."

Sandy said, "Turn and run, kid. Git goin'!"

The face was screwed up. A long while ago Sandy had descended from a cayuse and landed upon his head, which had permanently twisted his neck to one side. It gave him a remarkably fierce appearance now as he sat his horse and bade young Terry Glenn to run—Terry had an idea that he might shoot him in the back.

Terry clapped in his spurs and the animal sprang into the air. It was running when it lit, and Terry was down on its neck, urging it on. There was a slippery place, and then the small opening in the trees. Terry made for it.

He heard the shot which whined over his head. That was within pistol range. His one hope was to get out of sight before Sandy could go for the rifle in its scabbard.

He would never know whether Sandy had meant to hit him, or only to scare him, but the aura of death had been around him there on the river bank.

Among the trees his horse was more cautious. He rode about a hundred yards. There was a large juniper, and there he stopped, flinging himself off the pony's back. The rifle was in his hands.

The pony, reins dangling, would not go far. Terry braced himself against the bole of the tree, holding the rifle very steady.

He waited for some time. There was no sound. He whistled, and his pony came to him. He remounted and rode slowly towards the town of Grant.

There was no question of turning back. He had been shaken down by Sandy Gate. There would be no rest for him until he had found Sandy, met him on even terms and avenged himself. The Alabama blood of Terry Glenn had been well-seasoned with the six-gun Texas philosophy.

BLACKIE DAW had set Sandy Gate upon him to get the oil-skin packet; that much was clear. The Eye-Bar-O cows would get to Grant, because no one could steal a branded herd that large. But there would be fifty thousand dollars to change hands, and Blackie would have the official papers. Blackie would say that Hay Carruthers had designated him to act for the Eye-Bar-O if anything happened to Hay.

Peg Bottome owned part of that herd. Miz Holley had invested her few hard-earned dollars in it. The hot Alabama blood slowly burned in Terry Glenn's veins.

A mile along the road to Grant his anger abated and his brain began to work. He slowed down the pony in the midst of the wide trail left by the cattle. He turned and went back to the river, then, lickety split over the short grass.

At the first bend he dropped rein. He dismounted and deliberately stripped off his clothing at the spot where Hay Carruthers had gone under water. The current was dying slowly to normal, now. He entered the stream naked, shivering as his skin met the cold of the water.

It was exhausting, diving beneath the surface, coming up to struggle against the current. He stuck at it until his lips turned blue. He drifted downstream always diving.

He took one more deep breath, tried one last time. His clutching hands waved, touched damp cloth. He came up, his eyes blazing.

Down he went again, fumbling with the root which had entangled the cloth of Hay Carruthers clothing. When he came up again, he was towing the body.

It was the hardest task of all to haul the body up the slippery bank. Terry almost went for his horse and rope, but somehow he managed. The big trail boss lay on his back, stretched on the grass.

There was a startled look in the dead, staring eyes. It was growing dusk and Terry shook with cold. He bent and turned Carruthers upon his stomach, hating the job, yet knowing worse was to come.

For a long moment he forgot the cold, forgot everything, staring at the hole in the blue shirt. There was a little blood

staining the cloth. He knew now why Hay had thrown up his hands and disappeared so quickly to his death in the river.

He went for his clothes. He had no idea what the Law would say. He knew only that Hay Carruthers had been shot in the back, that Blackie Daw wanted the drive papers, that he alone was aware of the facts. He knew better than to pack Hay's body to Grant, where he was unacquainted.

The hardest job of all was to dig a shallow grave with the bowie knife which had been his father's.

It was late in the evening, and the shadows of the cedars and the junipers were deep purple when he had finished. He muttered a brief prayer, covered Hay's face with his own blanket and scratched and kicked the dirt back over the dead man.

He made a cairn of such stones as he could find. Then he mounted the cayuse and headed for Grant once more. There was trouble ahead, and young Terry Gleen was avid for it.

CHAPTER THREE

When a Lawman Dies

CHRONOPOLIS was no Sunday school settlement, but Grant, which had been only a wide place in the road until the cattle had made it a center, was a roaring hell-on-wheels. Along its one main street were fifty saloons and gambling houses and dance halls. Cowboys, buffalo hunters, Indians, Mexicans, and gamblers stalked the wooden boards of its sidewalks day and night. Grant never slept.

It was growing dusk of the second day after his discovery of the bullet-slain Hay Carruthers that Terry Glenn tethered his horse in the public corral and found food and cleanliness of a sort in the Bevoe House. It was full night when he walked out into the street of a million noises.

There was plenty of light from the lamps of the places of amusement, from houses which threw fitful gleams upon the street. A puncher rode in and punctuated the simmering excitement with sixguns aimed at the sky. Terry walked slowly, looking right and left, searching for familiar figures.

His holster was tied down. He did not wear his gloves, and every so often he worked the fingers of his right hand with his left. Terry's jaw was solid, and in his eye glimmered the light of battle.

Down the center of the street a man sauntered. Under one arm he carried a sawed-off shotgun. The other rested on his hip, so that he looked almost effeminate. His long, blond hair descended to his shoulders, and his mustache and trimmed beard were neatly combed.

Terry looked at him with interest, noting the star brightly polished upon the long, high-buttoned black coat.

The man said softly, "Looking for something, stranger?"

"Yes," said Terry. "For a man named Blackie Daw."

"Ah!" said the man. "Blackie, eh?" I am Marshall Hagood, stranger. If you find Blackie, convey my best regards."

Terry said, "You look like you were loaded for bear, Marshal."

The man smiled, and Terry saw that he was as handsome as a picture, with white, even teeth and red lips.

"There are certain people in this town tonight who have—" the lawman broke off.

A window had gone up across the street, and the shotgun came up. Terry stepped back, unlimbering his own Colt. He saw a man dimly in the second-story window, detected the glint of metal. Without thinking, he fired a snap-shot.

The metal thing clattered. The man leaned slowly from the window-sill, then fell with great speed to the street.

Marshall Hagood stood stock-still, the shotgun steady. His voice was perfectly calm. "The light angle was bad from here. I reckon you saw him plain, stranger."

Terry said, "I saw the gun. I. . . ."

The Marshal was already striding towards the building, in plain view, with no effort at concealment. Terry blew the smoke from his gun, then followed, trying to keep his own steps as firm and even as Hagood's.

The man was dead. The marshal said, "You caught him in the head. It's one of those men came in with the Eye-Bar-

O, I see. A bad lot. . . . Now, I wonder where Blackie Daw is."

TERRY stared down at Grab Wilkins. He was one of Blackie Daw's riders, one of the men he had worked with those weeks coming up the trail. Now he stared back, unseeing, dead at Terry's hand.

Marshall Hagood was saying, "I had a warning. There are a mob of high-binders in town tonight. There is something big afoot, and they swore to kill me. I reckon this is the first attempt, but I never thought they would be so bold."

His eyes were puzzled. A man came up, saw the body, went back into a saloon. Soon a deputy with a star upon his vest came running.

He said, "Blackie Daw ain't around, Bill. Nobody's seen him."

"Send out the word," said Hagood, "that I want him."

Terry waited until the deputy had looked at the dead man and then had gone. He said, "Did Blackie sell the Eye-Bar-O herd yesterday?"

"Yes," said Hagood. "What do you know about it? Who are you, stranger?"

Terry said, "I'm Terry Glenn of Chronopolis. I rode up the trail with that herd. My folks got money invested in it."

He told the marshal what had happened.

Hagood listened, his eyes never ceasing their patrol of the noisy street. Several men came and carried Grab Wilkins away. Nobody seemed particularly perturbed. No man came near to the marshal, nor attempted to speak with him.

Hagood said, "Daw had the papers, all right. I happen to know about the deal. He got a fair price."

Terry did not speak. He knew better than to make a direct accusation. Someone had shot Hay Carruthers, but he could not prove it was Blackie. All five of the men who could logically have been suspected had been off to the left, riding the herd. Any one might have shot Hay.

Hagood said, "Just stick around, Glenn. Keep your gun cleared and your eyes open. There'll be hell to pay in Grant tonight. I'm beginning to get some ideas."

He nodded and moved back into the middle of the street. He was a very brave man, with his shotgun ready, courting death from every dark alleyway. Terry reflected that he would not care to take first shot and miss Bill Hagood. He was an imposing sight, with his long hair and his slow, graceful tread, moving along in the flickering light.

Terry pushed through the swinging doors of a gambling establishment and into the familiar atmosphere. A girl came close to him and spoke, but he shook his head without looking at her. He went to the bar and ordered whiskey. He felt the need of the drink. His hands were not steady, what with the long ride and the sudden dealing of death.

The place was jammed. Terry leaned against the bar and searched it with his eyes. He saw none of the men he was looking for—Sandy Gate, Rowel Peters, Gandy Corum, Blackie. He saw dozens of tougher-seeming men, several black-frocked, pale-faced gamblers, but no one paid him any heed.

Yet there was a feeling in the air which went beyond the boisterous noise of the place. The tinny piano seemed to be beating out a warning. Bearded men strode by Terry and muttered to other tough-looking hangers-on.

A drunken cowpuncher staggered out between two shifty-eyed townsmen. Terry shook his head and paid for his drink.

A man sidled up and said, "You wanta see the elephant, stranger?" and Terry pushed his hand into the leering face, knocking the man backwards.

IN the street there was confusion, and horsemen rode swiftly up and down. Terry saw Bill Hagood farther down, the shotgun still over his arm, his handsome face serene.

Then the horsemen were gone, and swift silence descended on the street. People began to run for cover. Only Hagood remained, walking with the same slow, measured tread.

Terry's hand itched. He kept to the shadow of the buildings as well as he could. The light shone on Hagood. Something was about to happen.

The lone rider seemed harmless

enough. But a head popped out of a window and a long gun issued forth. Terry yelled, "Look out, marshal!" as he made his draw.

It was a long carry for the .45, but he turned it loose. He tried one shot, two, but the rifle at the upstairs window was still leveled.

Terry started to run, awkwardly in his high-heeled boots. The horseman had picked up speed. Hagood was between the two fires. It was a trap.

As Terry ran on, Hagood sensed his danger and whirled to meet the horseman. Terry fired again at the window. The rifle blazed and Hagood spun a little, going down on one knee. The horseman had an army carbine and was training it on the marshal, riding him down. Terry fired his last shot at the man on the horse.

His fingers were steady as he reloaded, but he could scarcely take his eyes from Hagood. The man was superb, down on one knee, holding his shotgun. As the rider came nearer, the horse shied. The shotgun banged, both barrels going off at once. The man and the horse went down backwards in the face of that thunderous roar.

Again the rifle spoke from the window. Terry went plunging across the street. He knew it was all up with Hagood. He got one glimpse of the indifferent, smiling features of the marshal as he turned slowly and fired the sixgun up at the window.

Then Terry was inside the building. It was a hardware store, and the stairs were in the back. There was a man behind the counter with a derringer; a pale, city man. Terry fired one shot at the man's belt buckle as the little gun threatened him. The man folded up like an old rug.

Terry went up the stairs, careful that his heels should not click to betray him. In the brief moment of his meeting with Hagood, in the game battle of the man under his eyes, respect for the marshal had been born. Somehow he felt that the whole thing tied up with the death of Hay Carruthers. He wanted to know the killer of Hagood, knowing that Grab Wilkins had made one attempt upon the marshal's life.

There was a hallway, and a door at the end. The attic was full of hardware implements, apparently it was used as a storeroom for the establishment below.

Terry heard a voice say, "That's the end of that crawlin' son!"

He thumbed back the hammer of the Colt and started past a pile of merchandise, going slowly. He could get to the door of the room and cover it. If there were two men in there, he could down them both. He had to know . . . and he wanted fiercely to pay off for the peace officer.

He made two stealthy steps. He was aware at the last moment of movement, and tried to turn catlike to meet it. But the blow against his head was terrific, even through the felt of the Stetson.

He stumbled, and someone caught him and dragged him, but quietly, almost strangling him with a hand over his mouth and nose.

He tried to bite, and a fist bounced off his chin. Then he knew no more. . . .

Cowtowns, as William Cox aptly shows you in this novelette, are no place for a weakling—but when a bunch of tough-handed cowmen leave their own trail hamlet and swear they'll take a nearby nester community apart with smashing lead, there's an epic battle in the offing! You'll go for Ed Earl Repp's great novel "Sixgun Savior of Doomed Range," in the March issue of *Ace High*. Buy it today!

CHAPTER FOUR

Death's Rendezvous

WHEN Terry Glenn awoke his mouth tasted like the inside of a sheepherder's glove and his head spun in a pinwheel circle. He got to his feet, reaching instinctively for the life-preserver in the holster on his lean flank. To his amazement, his fingers encountered the smooth

butt of the gun. He had not been disarmed.

He made a hasty inspection and found he was still in the storeroom of the hardware establishment. He was in a far corner, and he could see the door of the room from which Marshal Hagood had been shot. He staggered forward, going stubbornly toward that door.

At first the room seemed empty, then he was still in the storeroom of the hard- He struck a match saw the dead man's sharp features starring at the ceiling. It was one of the punchers who had ridden with Hay Carruthers on the drive, a tough kind named Holly Jacobson. There was a hole in his head, made by a .45 bullet, Terry thought.

There was no sound from the store below as Terry went quietly down, the Colt in his hand. Out in the street life went on, and the pianos of the houses up and down rattled their tunes. A quartette quavered out on *Oh, Susannah.* The old nickel watch told Terry it was midnight.

Yet someone must be thinking of Marshal Hagood, shot down keeping the peace in the middle of Grant's main street. Somewhere forces must be gathering to wreak vengeance. Hagood had died as the result of a planned ambush. Surely the men who had hired him, the few respectable business people of the cowtown, must be planning revenge.

Terry stood on the sidewalk, reeling a little. His hat had prevented a fractured skull, but his jaw ached and his eyes were not as clear as he would have liked.

He decided he could think better on a horse. He went towards the public corral, wondering why he had not been killed in the hardware storeroom, why his gun had not been taken, who had wanted Hagood killed, and how Grab Wilkins and the other Carruthers cowhands fitted into the picture.

Had there been a plot among them all to steal the fifty thousand dollars? Where was Blackie Daw hiding? Where were wry-necked Sandy Gate, Rowel Peters, Gandy Corum? Where was all the money?

He got to the corral and gave the attendent a silver dollar. As he selected his horse, the man, a Negro, came close and whispered, "I was to give you this, mister."

It was a folded bit of paper, scrawled in bad handwriting. Under the light of a lantern, Terry read it:

> Saddle up, but don't leave town. Meet me in the Chisholm House at 1:30.

It was unsigned, but addressed to Terry.

Terry saddled his horse and gave the Negro another dollar. The message could come only from someone who knew he was in Grant—which meant someone from the Carruther drive.

THE Chisholm House proved to be the gambling place in which Terry had stopped earlier in the evening. He saw now that it was the biggest of all the night-blooming houses. He went through the door, his step steady.

The first man he saw was Blackie Daw.

The big trail-hand was leaning against the bar at the far end. Of Sandy Gate and the others there was no sign. Terry went slowly forward, his gun-hand itching again.

He was dimly aware that the itching of that right hand was not a healthy sign. In his brief life, he had seen other men begin in that manner.

He had heard tales told of the James boys, the Daltons, of Billy Bonney and others, who had no yearning to be killers, but who had been coerced into the status of renegades by events beyond their control. Young Terry Glenn had killed one man that night in defense of Marshal Hagood; and he had probably killed the waddie up on that second floor of the hardware store.

And now he was going towards Blackie Daw, and in his heart was the urge to kill again. He had no doubt about the outcome of a duel between himself and Daw. He had seen the big man shoot, knew he was fast and accurate. But Blackie had never seen Terry's speed.

Even now, as he sidled down the bar, he was walking stealthily, looking for the edge. He wanted no one in his way. He wanted a clear way, a chance to back against the wall and hold off the mob while he made his escape. He would give

Blackie a chance to fill his hand, then shoot for the belt buckle. After which he would get out before Gate and the others could come from the back room.

He thought that Blackie did not see him. He kept on the lee side of a tall puncher, edging along. He stepped out suddenly from behind a big cowhand and was alongside the black-whiskered Daw.

Blackie said, "Don't make a break, kid. Don't look around. Just talk naturally to me. I'm pretendin' to be mad with you."

Blackie was scowling and his mouth made sneering grimaces, but the words were calm, and Blackie's eyes were intent and very bright.

Terry caught his breath.

Blackie said, "That's right. Now look scared, if you can. This is a tough, dangerous game, kid. There's only you and me now that Hagood's down. I couldn't be sure about you until you made that play for the marshal. There's twenty or thirty gun men after this money, kid, and only us to stop 'em!"

Terry said, "I don't understand what this is about."

Blackie still seemed to berate him, but the words tumbled out of the whiskers in cadenced swing, even and incisive.

"SANDY GATE'S an outlaw, and a slick one. I rode the trail up here to get him. I pretended to be one of them—you musta heard the stories about me. I hate to say this, kid, and this is why I couldn't take you in. But Hay Carruthers fell for a scheme of Sandy's to steal the fifty thousand dollars, split it two ways and light out for South America."

Terry said, "I don't believe it."

"You will," said Daw patiently. "You got your gun, haven't you? I'm the man who hit you in that store room."

"Then you let Hagood get killed!" said Terry, tensely.

"There were seven men in that room," said Blackie slowly.

"They were watching the door. The hardwareman was in with them. Outside were a dozen more, and how you got through them, I don't see. I reckon they thought you were a customer of the place when you walked in so bold. Hagood had been threatened—he's a brave man, but a stupid one in some ways. I warned him not to make that play in the street. They got him out there by threatenin' him—knowin' he would defy 'em. That Sandy's shrewd."

Terry said, "But why should you be in all this? Why did you let Sandy go with me up the river? You knew he . . ."

Blackie said, "I'm a Texas Ranger, kid." He reached negligently for a drink on the bar, and managed to let Terry see his palm. The star of the Rangers nestled there, blinking in the light of the chandelier. "I had to go all the way with 'em. I figured you could take care of yourself; if you didn't, I'd had to of let you go. I told you this is a desperate game. I got fifty thousand of the Eye-Bar-O money to protect and a man to get—dead or alive!"

Terry sipped at his whiskey. "I don't see how you're going to protect the money and get the gang, if there's so many of them."

Blackie said, "I'm supposed to meet them in a room upstairs and split. They'll be comin' in here soon, one and two at a time. Gate, Rowel Peters and Corum are the leaders, but they were all in on it. Carruthers was an honest man, but when he got on the drive with that crew, it was too much for him. Every one of them was ready to take to the hills. Sandy had no idea of splitting two ways with Hay. He was conning him around."

Terry said, "It's hard to believe that Hay. . . ."

"You'll find a lot like him out here," said Blackie. There was a sad note in the big man's voice. "Men who mean to go straight. Men who are brave and kind and good . . . but unable to stand off the temptation of easy money, easy women, the excitement. The Law's got to come to this country. . . ."

He shook himself. He said, "Go in the back. Wait a half hour, then drift in here. Maybe you can make those stairs. If you can, come up fast. I only want you to cover the stairs. They'll be coming up after me plenty fast when I unlimber my guns."

Terry saw the weighted shoulder holster under the loose coat. And two more guns hung from the heavy cartridge belt. Blackie smiled and said, "I have a derringer up my sleeve, too, and one in my

vest pocket. There'll be no time to reload up there."

"You'll get killed!"

"Most prob'ly," grinned Blackie. "Now I'm gonna order you out of here, and I want you to go."

He raised his voice, saying, "You got your pay, Glenn, so don't hang around me! I got no time for you!"

At least three men within hearing glanced at one another and nodded. Terry shrugged and turned away.

HE went out the front door without looking back. Down the street, he turned in between two buildings. He came back along the cluttered rear of buildings until he was behind the Chisholm House.

He reconoitered, glancing at his watch. Upstairs there was a light in a single-windowed room. Blackie had said that he was to cover the stairs only . . . but of course there was no real reason why he should cover anything. There was almost certain death inside the Chisholm House that night, and Terry Glenn need take no part in it.

There had been killings enough. Hay Carruthers in the river; Grab Wilkins, Marshal Hagood, the cowhand in the hardware storeroom—and now Blackie Daw proved to be a Ranger. All hell would break loose any moment.

His trigger finger itched again. There it was; the killer instinct. . . .

He tried briefly to tell himself it was the stake in the money which Blackie was protecting—that he could not go home without Miz Holley's share, without Peg Bottome's share. But the stake was too small and Peg too wealthy, and he knew Miz Holley would say.

He went hastily to the corral and the horse neighed in friendly fashion as he mounted and rode out on to the street.

CHAPTER FIVE

Killer's End

THE half hour had passed. Young Terry rode around to the back of the Chisholm House, his grass rope in his hand. He had toiled many hours, learning to handle that reata. Blackie Daw had said to hold the stairs, but there was a projecting joist thrusting out from under the eaves of the building, and the rope made a hiss as Terry uncoiled it in the moonlight.

The horse stood quite still. Terry dropped the reins and made sure of the rope's grip upon the joist. The rope grew taut in his hands.

He stood, balancing precariously upon the saddle. He placed one boot against the clapboards to steady himself. Then he went hand over hand, dangling, climbing the rope.

The window was wide to the night air.

From inside, Blackie Daw's voice said, "You heard me, Sandy. You're under arrest."

Gate's rasp was unmistakable. "Make your play, Blackie. Looks like you're in the middle."

Blackie said, "I'm taking you back, Sandy. That man in Houston never had a chance. It's a murder charge."

"I'm taking that fifty thousand," said Gate. "You'd better turn it loose now."

Blackie said sharply, "I'll turn loose. Hands up!"

Gate yelled, "Get him, Rowell!"

A gun crashed. Terry kicked himself away from the building, so that he swung wide. The rope brought him back in a pendulum swing. He entered feet first, sliding over the window sill. His gun was free as he landed.

Blackie Daw was against the wall. One of the hands was down, and one of Blackie's guns smoked in his hand. Rowel Peters was drawing a bead upon Blackie.

Gate was nearest the door. As Terry made his spectacular entrance, Gate was going down on one knee, his twisted face mad with rage.

Terry said very calmly, "I've got Peters!" And he let the hammer fall on the Colt.

Peters dropped his gun and sprawled. Gandy Corum was already spinning like a top as Blackie fired once more. Terry turned his gun against Sandy Gate.

But Sandy wasn't there. The little man had taken one shot at Blackie, and was gone through the door.

Blackie steadied himself with a hand against the wall. Terry said, "You're hit!"

"In the flesh," said Blackie. "I turned sideways."

There was a torn place in the big man's shirt on the left side, and blood welled through. Terry said, "Can you walk all right? I got a horse down below. There's a rope."

"Sandy's gone for help. There'll be a dozen tough ones, or more. Hagood was the Law," said Blackie. "Nothin' will stop this town now. It's full of badmen."

Terry said, "Can you slide down?"

Blackie moved experimentally. He said, "You'd better go first. Mebbe I couldn't make it. You'd be alone up here."

There was footsteps outside, ascending the stairs. Terry stepped into the open door. He said, "Hell, we can take them from here until you get over the shock."

Blackie moved away from the wall. He was pale, but his hands were steady. He said, "I can't run. I got to get Sandy...."

Two big men came up the stairs with drawn guns. Terry said to them, "Back down!"

One of them fired and lead pounded into the lintel of the doorway. Terry's Colt spoke, then again. The two men toppled backwards noisily, down the flight of stairs.

Blackie said, "That's neat shootin'."

He walked slowly, the blood running down his blue jean pants, soaking the wide leather belt. He said, "Let's not run. Let's go on down and get them."

Terry said quietly, "Yes. Let's go to them!"

THE itch in his hands was stronger, now, driving him. The two moved without haste, going down the stairs.

Gate looked up at them as they hit the landing. He shrieked, "There they are!"

His long-barrelled revolver turned on them. Terry fired off-hand, and Gate went own. The boots of the desperadoes about him trampled his small body.

Blackie said, "Hold it "We're taking Sandy out of here!"

A man stepped away from the crowd and raisded his hands. He said, "My Gawd, they'll down the lot of us!"

There was one shot from someone in the rear of the crowd, but it went wild. Blackie picked out a man with gun half-raised and fired carefully. The gun dropped and the man moaned with the pain of a bullet-shattered wrist.

"Get 'em up! Against the wall, everybody!"

They obeyed. The calm, strong voice of the big man had them cowed. The pale, serene face of the youngster who held his gun so steadily sent them, their backs to the wall, their hands placed against the rough boards.

Blackie and Terry came on, still moving slowly. Sandy Gate was a limp bundle of old clothes, lying alone on the floor. Terry shouldered him, noting that he breathed.

They backed out toward Daw's horse, tethered at the end of the hitch rail. Gate sprawled over the pommel, inert. Terry searched him rapidly for hidden weapons.

Blackie said, "Ride for the trail. The TU outfit is coming in. There'll be food and shelter with them until I can ride."

"I'll follow you," said Terry.

He went around behind the building, and found his pony munching sparse

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grass. He mounted and came back. Blackie was going down the main street.

AS Terry overhauled the big man, it happened. He could see it all plainly. Sandy Gate had been more stunned than hurt. He came to, and immediately he acted, writhing like a snake and twisting. He plucked the gun from Blackie's holster before the Ranger knew that he renegade was conscious.

It was the act of a second. Terry was moving rapidly on the pony, on the left. His hand flashed back, and the bowie knife came like a faithful friend to his expert fingers free of its lanyard.

Gate's throat gurgled as Blackie's gun fell to earth. The little man flopped once and rolled from Blackie's grasp. Terry dismounted.

He stood there, hearing the shouts of men behind, reckoning on the pursuit. Blackie Daw looked down on him and said slowly, "You're a killin' fool, Terry."

Terry shook his head, as though to clear away the cobwebs. He said, "I—I don't like it, Blackie. Killing ain't—"

"Get up on that horse," said Blackie. "We got to get out of here. Sandy Gate's dead, and I've got the money in my belt. We'll ride for the Fort."

"I got to go home," said young Terry.

"At the Fort," said Blackie solemnly, "they'll give you a star. . . . They'll give you a star," he repeated, "and then the Law will be on your side. You'd better join up with the Rangers, Terry."

Terry threw a leg over the cayuse. He said, "Blackie, you're plumb right. I been a gambler, a cowpuncher an' almost a killer. I better join the Rangers—before I find the Rangers chasin' me."

Blackie's white teeth showed in a grin as he put out his strong-fingered hand. "C'mon," he said. "We're headin' for the Fort. If I can't bring Gate in as a prisoner, I can sure do the next best thing. I can bring a damn' good fightin' partner back with me!"

And he did!

THE END

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Tame Your Own Wolves!

Folks said there was only one way grizzled Sheriff Reed could hold onto the law job he needed. That was to get the flinty-eyed, surly young renegade to tell where his partners had ridden with the bank loot—if he had to singe the kid's feet to do it. But Emil Reed, wise in the ways of wolves—both four- and two-legged—had a better idea. . . .

"There was a mess of tanglin' there for a minute as they grabbed their horses. . . ."

By Tom W. Blackburn

THEY had the kid in the jail office when grizzled Sheriff Reed rode in. He was a flinty-faced kid with empty, tied-down holsters at his skinny thighs and a certain stubborn steel in the glare he turned on the crowd.

Hard John Hosking, the banker, had a bear grip on the twisted front of the kid's shirt. Two other men had his arms cinched

up mercilessly behind him. He was chalk-white, that kid; hurt and scared as hell. But he didn't flinch, even when Hard John banged him on the ear.

"Talk up, damn you!" Hard John shouted. "Talk up! Where's them pards of yours?"

Sheriff Emil Reed paused in the doorway, a silvery-haired man with an easy carriage and square, blunt features. There was no trace of fatigue on him to show that he had ridden the fur off Satan's back all afternon since he's gotten word, deep in the country, that a gang of renegades had looted Hosking's bank here in Olequah in broad daylight.

"Easy, John," Emil cautioned, riveting his glance on the banker's grip.

Reluctantly, Hosking loosed his hold under the lawman's steady stare, and stepped back.

"Damn it, Reed," he protested. "Why can't you be on hand when you're needed? If you'd been here . . . "

Emil tossed his hat on the desk. "Olequahs just one town, John," he reminded the banker gently. "And Creek County is a big stretch of country. A sheriff has to move around a little, sometimes. This kid now, is he a part of the gang?"

Emil was aware of the pause before the banker answered. And he saw that everyone else seemed to be waiting Hard John's say before they made their own. Suddenly the banker's jaw clamped and he jerked his head toward the prisoner. It was then that Emil saw the reason for Hard John's temper and testy impatience.

There was a blue welt showing through the banker's short hair—the ugly mark of a well-laid gun-barrel. Emil listened to Hosking's words a bit more sympathetically now.

"You're damn right," the banker exploded. "What do you want, Reed—a signed confession? There was a sight of horses on the street at noontime today because of the mail-train. Four men come into the bank. They shot Bob Clay dead in his cage and got me alongside the head when I popped out of my office. They cleaned the vault out and was onto the street when Watkins tumbled to 'em and opened up on 'em from his store. He was the first to spot this young devil!"

Emil looked at old man Watkins, and the storeman nodded. "I cut down on 'em as they made their horses, bunched by the bank. Reckon I missed man-meat, but I must have skinned a horse. They was a mess of tanglin' there for a minute, and some dust. Then the four which come from the bank hit leather and fogged it—splittin' four ways at the edge of town. I run over and found this kid under the one horse that was left. Looked like he'd been trampled a mite whiles the others was mountin'. I got his guns afore he got his breath. . . . "

Hard John said: "Only one way to look at it, Emil. This kid was posted lookout and told to mind the horses. The others left him, but he'll know where they're headed, sure. We're tryin' to make him talk, and by God, we will! I've seen a stubborn man learn how to talk before now!"

Sheriff Emil sat back on the edge of his desk, calculation running freely through him. Old Bob Clay was dead; the bank was likely ruined. Hosking was sore-headed and vengeful. There was a snarl to Watkin's voice which must closely mirror the sentiment of all Olequah. He knew what they expected him to do about it all.

Yet a sheriff was supposed to be bound by the letter of the law. Bound by oath to be a human being without heart or sympathy or vengeance — a machine geared to duty, sworn to mete out justice in equal portions to accused and accuser alike.

He turned to the boy. "You heard what these men said, kid. What's your side?"

The boy's face was wooden, his glance a gray wall. "Nothin',' he said distinctly. "I got nothin' to say at all."

"You see!" Hard John roared. "He won't talk—won't admit anything! We go to make him open up, Emil!"

"How?"

"How? why . . . why . . " The banker's glance flickered toward the rest for support. "Beat him, maybe—anything—I don't give a damn! But we got to make him!"

Emil shook his head gravely. "It ain't in the statutes." He took the boy's arm. "Come on, kid."

He led him toward the cell-block.

EMIL didn't try to follow the dim trail left by the outlaws. Even the town admitted that was useless. So he sat and listened.

It took to sundown to hear out everybody who had something to say about the robbery and about the silent prisoner. But finally the last of them was done, and Emil was alone in his office to do the thinking for which he felt a need.

He was troubled in many ways. First, there was himself, and he had no illusions. He had been a good sheriff because there had been peace in his county. But lawlessness had struck, and the test was now his. Long ago he had proved himself a good neighbor and a wise rancher.

He hadn't failed as a friend to the men who now looked to him in their loss. But should he be unable to prove his worth as a lawman, Olequah would—quite according to human nature—swiftly forget all that had gone before. The town would dispense with him in its own way.

And this kid—his only tool with which to accomplish the things the county would expect—was a flinty, savage youngster, almost inhuman in his bleakness. Like a wolf. And the evidence . . . Hell! What evidence the town had handed him about that kid was not enough—not near enough.

The boy had only to maintain his innocence and his silence and go free in a short course of time. An unwelcome enough conclusion, but obvious from the facts at hand. There was but one hope, that the boy, if he was guilty, would talk in the end, and talk freely.

After a while Emil went back to the cell block where the kid was pacing restlessly. But when he saw Emil's shadow he stopped and dropped down on the cot, his face expressionless. Watching him, Emil grew slowly aware of a haunting feeling of recognition.

At first he couldn't tag it in his mind, then it came. A slow smile crossed Emil's face. He reached for a bag of tobacco and a packet of papers from his short pocket, flipped them through the bars at the kid, and went back to his office.

Wolf and wolf-pup—that was it!

Emil put his hat on and went down the street to the Chinaman's. Maybe this wouldn't be so hard, after all. He squatted on a counter stool and watched the Chinaman work up a tray with a thick steak, spuds, hot bread, pie and strong, black coffee. . . .

It was something like it had been out at the ranch last spring when that lone wolf had come down to haunt the calving-pasture. A smooth, restless killer with unblinking eyes, like this kid. A wolf too cunning to be trapped, too sly to be shot, and always getting what it wanted.

Yet, when Emil had gotten the hang of it, it hadn't been hard to get the big beast. It just took time. He took to leaving a big chunk of raw meat in the open, near the house. Meat the wolf didn't have to kill. That curly, howling killer had come to the bait, avoiding it only the two times Emil had punched strychnine capsules into it. Almost human, that wolf had been. Avoiding the calves when it could get a free meal without the dangers of a lawless kill. And in the end, it came to expect that meat.

It was then that Emil began changing the times when he put it out. And gradually he worked the time around until the beast came one morning when there was good shooting-light. Emil knew, then, that he could have made a sort of savage friend out of that wolf. But in a wolf there is no good, and Emil dropped it with a 30-30 slug.

This kid, now. . . . Emil rang a piece of silver on the Chinaman's counter and picked up the bountiful tray.

He was whistling when he opened the cell block and slid the supper onto the stool beside his prisoner's cot. The makings still lay on the floor where Emil had tossed them through the bars. He picked them up, whisked the cloth from the tray, and laid the makings beside the food. Only when the kid saw what lay under that cloth did the stoniness frozen into his face thaw a little.

"For me?" he gulped suspiciously. "All that—for me?"

"Why not?" asked Emil easily. "I eat that much for supper every night. What's good enough for me is all right for you, ain't it?"

The kid didn't answer. He kept staring at the tray until Emil said, "Good night, son," and went out, locking the door behind him.

EMIL was awake once or twice during the night. Each time he could hear the smooth, restless pacing of the kid. But in the morning the boy gave no sign of passing a sleepless night. He gave no greeting, nor any indication of willingness to talk about anything—the weather, the supper, himself or the robbery.

Emil brought him a breakfast big enough for two men. . . . It had taken him weeks to win his wolf. . . .

Midmorning brought Hosking and Watkins to the jail office. Hard John was red-eyed and growling. "How about it?" he demanded, jerking his head toward the cell block.

Emil shrugged. "Seems he slept first rate. But he ain't talked none, yet."

Old man Watkins grunted savagely. "Emil, Bob Clay's wife's a widow, and her with two kids half grown. If the money out of John's vault ain't back in sixty days, half of us in the valley will be bankrupt with the bank goin' under. What the hell do we care how that kid slept? We come down to work on him!"

Emil stared for a moment at a place on Watkin's shirt where his wife had sewed a button out of line, so that the cloth bowed out and wrinkled. Directly he pushed his chair back and came to his feet.

"I got as much money in John's bank as any of the rest of you," he said quietly. "I've gone fishing with Bob Clay every spring for ten years, and I reckon him and me was as good friends as most. But I'm sheriff here. It's my job to turn up them bank robbers and murderers. But we won't turn 'em up by beatin' the tar out of a boy you fellers can't even be sure was with 'em!"

"He don't deny it, does he?" Hard John snapped.

"He don't admit it, either," Emil pointed out stolidly. "Can either of you—*will* either of you boys swear you know the kid was a part of that crew? Or will you dig me up some gent that can?

The two townsmen looked at one another. It was a dead-center shot. Both of them were inherently honest—a pair of men just by nature, warped now only because of the ruin which threatened them. For a long moment both were silent. Then one and the other shook his head.

"Not for sure," Watkins admitted grudgingly. "Leastways, not so's you could prove it. But I'm as certain as hell he was holdin' horses for 'em, and you know I never been a man to make mistakes thataway!"

Emil nodded. "I know," he said, and his voice held a jeering note. "But you're makin' one this time. Chargin' a kid on an assumption! Don't either one of you damn' fools realize that right this minute I got no legal right to hold that kid? Can't do it more than a few days, anyhow—maybe on suspicion. If nothin' turns up between now and then, I'm lettin' him go. And meanwhile, we're leavin' him be! He's a human being, just like you and me."

Hard John Hosking bit a tag of loose leaf from his cigar, spat it out the door. "Emil," he said with studied slowness, "you named it. We voted you in, and we got to stick with what you give us. But a man goes to pieces in this country mighty fast without friends. I got no call to read you your duty, nor to name your conscience. But by hell, mister, you'll handle this kid right, or afore we're done with you you'll hate yourself!"

EMIL nodded. He understood this warning as well as he understood his own position. The banker and Watkins filed out the door, tight-lipped and angry. The sheriff watched them go.

They were friends, both of them—the accumulation of the best a man meets in a lifetime. Hosking had been right, too, about a man without friends. It made Emil think deeply of the wisdom of fancying a kinship between a boy and a dead wolf—of backing a hunch these men could not understand.

But ten minutes after they left, the kid called to him from the cell block.

Emil went back, and he felt better. A sympathy came to him, an understanding of the hunger for many things this youngster must have known up some dim backtrail. The kid was forward against the bars, his face still wooden, but there was a deepening of color in his opaque eyes.

"Hand a broom in to me, sheriff," he said thinly. "The place needs a muckin' out."

Emil got the broom and went back into the office to hide his satisfaction. But it

tuckered out after a while. Through the rest of the day matters did not change. There were no more requests from the kid, no more talk. Emil brought supper again from the Chinaman's. But nothing came of it. He went out a little later onto the street for his own supper and found a queer awkwardness surrounding him in the town.

Little by little the thing came to him—little groups talking of Bob Clay and his family; lowered glances and frozen, puzzled stares that turned toward the sheriff of Creek County. And a silent, yet clearly audible murmur of protest against a friend who protected a guilty man . . . a murmur against the kid, himself.

It was, Emil reasoned out as he moved down the street, a natural progression of events. Olequah was grown too solidly to raise a mob of the old brand which used to make its own law in the days of the Territory. But the old inclination was still there.

He had refused to follow a course his fellow townsmen felt was right. He had remembered how long it had been since violence had struck among them, and he had clung to the tenet, a portion of his own oath of office, which held a man should be presumed innocent of any charge until proved guilty.

That Olequah, on the other hand, should see only Bob Clay's widow and their ruined bank and a prisoner, then bind the three inseparably together was—like the stony temper of the kid—a thing beyond Emil's control. He cut his supper short and went back to the jail.

He found the kid against the cell-door bars, gripping them hard. "What's stirrin' the town, Tinbadge?" the kid demanded. "It got a bellyache?"

There was no visible concern in the words, just a flat, bitter tonelessness. And even in here, Emil could sense the tension and condemnation he had felt on the street. He knew the kid could feel it too.

"Something like that," he agreed amiably. And opening the boy's cell, he stepped inside.

He sat down slowly on the foot of the cot and waited until the boy looked at him. "Folks are some stirred up, maybe as much at me as at you. The bank was gutted; the valley will go belly-up unless we find the money. A fine woman, mother of two boys like yourself, has been made a widow. . . . It won't be easy for a woman with two kids to make a go in this country."

"Tough!" the boy mocked harshly. "Me, I never even had a maw!"

"Yeah, tough," Emil mused quietly. "Tough on a lot of us. My friends don't like the way I'm handling this."

The kid snorted. "You ain't handlin' it like a regular sheriff. A regular sheriff would have been hellin' it all over the hills, lookin' for shadows!"

"Or workin' you over with a sack full of shot, or maybe a hot iron," murmured Emil. "Well, each man to his own taste. But I'd sure like to lay my sights over the devils that made Mary Clay a widow!" He rose, and watching the kid from the cover of his brushy brows, he saw the thin lips twitch and pull together again.

Slowly, so as not to break the mood, Emil crossed to him, laid a hand on his shoulder. "Son, you could do a heap of good for this county by makin' a little talk. Don't you figger it might be a back-straightenin' thing to do if you was to tell a man where he might run onto some bold jiggers that'd be likely better off dead?"

He felt the tremble of the boy's shoulder under his hand and he held his breath.

The kid finally said: "Sheriff, if I was workin' for you, takin' your bounty, eatin' your grub—and there was no other grub to keep me from starvin'—wouldn't you figger me a skunk if I crossed a deal on you, turned traitor, connived with a gent that was gunnin' for you?"

EMIL thought a long time. He could see this was an important question to the kid. And he could frame only one honest and logical answer. "I reckon," he nodded, "I wouldn't hold much for a man on my string who'd double-cross me or knife me in the back that way. Does that answer your question?"

"Yeah," said the kid, and his shoulder was stiff again. "It does. Now I'll answer yours. I couldn't tell you where them robbers might be. Honest, I couldn't!"

Emil went back into his office and sat down, disappointment keen inside of him. For a minute, he had been close. And now he could think of a hundred ways to an-

swer that question of the kid's—ways which would have drawn a different conclusion, would have brought different results. Now he'd forever closed the kid's mouth . . . .

He sat and smoked until the excitement of the town had reached its pitch and died away again. And he was glad once more that this wasn't five or ten years ago, recalling that aroused men can be ugly.

After a while he stretched out on his cot, but sleep wouldn't come. He rolled and tossed, his brain afire with restlessness and vague thoughts that eluded him.

With the first gray streaks of dawn, he came up, watery-eyed with fatigue. There was an idea in his head. An idea so fragile he dared not think about it too much. He pulled on his boots and went down to the silent livery barn. He found the kid's pony, saddled it, and brought it to the rear of the jail.

Inside again, he opened the kid's cell, roused him, and handed him his twin guns and a gold coin.

"Your pony's out back," he said. "I got only one word of advice. I'd quit hellin' around. Find me a steady job and work at it. That way you'll keep out of trouble!"

The kid looked at his guns and at the coin in his palm. His skinny fists clenched. "Thanks for the purty advice, Sheriff. You know where-at I could get said job? In ol' man Watkins' store, maybe?" He went bitter. "Or the bank? Or off of any jigger around here who knows I been in your lousy jail?"

Emil pulled out a pencil stub and a battered tally book, began to write. What he set down he tore out and handed to the kid. "The Coffee Pot spread is six miles or so west," he said. "Give that note to my foreman and tell him I'll see him in a few days. He's to start you at thirty a month. You'll get more when you earn it."

The boy stared at the paper. He stared at Emil. Then he stared at the blank wall of the jailhouse. Finally he said: "So now I'm workin' for you?"

"Yep," said Emil. "I just hired me a hand that won't double-cross me or slip a knife in my ribs when my back's turned. You boys are hard to find. Now, get—before some son wakes up and takes a pot at you while you're ridin' past!"

The kid nodded and ducked. A moment later even the sound of his pony's hoofs was stilled.

"I'll betcha he's laughin'," gloomed Emil. "Laughin' up his sleeve at me!"

ALL through the long morning hours, Emil brooded. He kept repeating to himself that the kid would take that note straight to Bill Evers, his foreman. But somehow repetition didn't help Emil to believe that hope fully. He remembered how uncertain he'd been about the wolf. Would it come for its meat today? And how many times the wolf had crossed him up. This kid was foxier than any wolf that ever ran.

Mounting doubt and a strong curiosity disturbed Emil as the hours marched on. Just before noon Hard John Hosking came into the office. He saw the empty cell, nodded his head grimly.

"You're the first damn' fool I ever called a friend," ground out the banker. "You turned him loose, and you lost us our only chance!"

"I give him a note to Bill Evers," Emil protested, and realized how foolish this all must sound. "I'm puttin' the kid to work on the Coffee Pot."

Hard John took the cigar from his mouth, laughed in Emil's face, and walked out.

The day moved on. Shadows lengthened, and since he had no prisoner to watch and provide for, Emil presently got his horse from the livery and started for home. Gnawing curiosity made him ride more swiftly than usual.

He felt relieved when two horsemen hailed him at a creek crossing. But his relief was short-lived as Old Watkins and Hard John Hosking rode up to flank him.

"Where you bound, Reed?" Hard John asked.

Emil answered him tonelessly. "Figgered I'd sleep tonight at the ranch."

The banker nodded, grimly. "We got a errand taking us thataway. We'll ride along."

The three bore up the ridge. A little later they came to the lane which swung off to Emil's place. He pulled up there, and because he had been born and bred to this country, he stuck to its courtesy.

"You boys eaten?"

Both shook their heads, and when Emil rode up the lane, they followed.

THE hands were at supper, and the kid was not there. Emil tried to tell himself he was not disappointed, that he hadn't expected it to be different. He nodded to Bill Evers, called on the cook to set out three more places, and sat down at the far end of the table.

There was a little talk for a while about what went on in town and what went on at the ranch and how affairs were in the hills. Emil took his part and hoped against hope that Bill Evers would mention the kid.

It was the banker who spoke of him first. "By the way, Bill," he asked the foreman innocently, "your new hand going to work out all right?"

Evers turned a blank face toward the banker. "What new hand?"

A brittle gleam came into Hard John's eyes. "That kid Emil sent out today.

Evers shook his head. "You're joshin' me," he protested.

He looked at Emil. "What is this, boss?"

"Forget it," snapped Emil, and looked at his plate.

The meal passed swiftly and in heavy silence. Led by Bill Evers, the hands quit the kitchen, leaving only the two townsmen and the sheriff at the board. Silence, rolling down from the hills, seemed to cram the room, making it unbearable.

Then the scrape of Hard John's chair sounded like a thunderclap. "It'd be easiest for you to resign, Emil," the banker said heavily. "I'll keep an eye out for a buyer for the Coffee Pot. . . ."

Emil came also to his feet. He heard the banker's words, gathered their full import. But he heard something else which drove Hard John's talk from his mind. That sound kept growing until it became the shuffle of weary ponies moving up to the house.

Hosking and Watkins caught the sound, too, their faces turned up in curiosity. Then it stopped.

Emil moved over, impatiently now, and jerked open the door. Outside a good moon silhouetted a rider sitting loose and grim on a blown and weary horse. And back of him were four other animals, each carrying a grisly burden.

Across the saddles of each, lashed tight, lay a dead man. The weaving, sagging figure on the first horse tried to straighten.

"Boss," he croaked, "I got 'em! Like I said, I didn't know where they were, first-off—but I nosed 'em out. In the saddle-bags you'll find . . . " He sighed and pitched off into Emil's arms. . . .

Later, Old Man Watkins paced the porch and smoked; Hard John sat in a corner and counted the bank loot over and over while the medico from Olequah worked on the kid. Only once did Hard John speak.

"Pull him through, Doc," he ordered. "No matter what it costs, pull him through. I'll stand the bill."

"Money can't buy miracles, John!" the medico clipped without straightening above the shattered form before him. "This boy's got three bad holes in him."

There was a long silence after that. Finally the medico drew back.

"He'll do," he said quietly. "He's near empty of blood, but he's got guts to spare. With luck, he'll be fit to ride in a month!"

* * *

Afterward, when the kid was sleeping and they were all gathered on Emil's front porch, there was another surge of silence.

Emil stroked the square of his jaw to hide the little smile that came unbidden to his lips. These men were each of them thinking he had put something over on them—something neat and clever and not understandable. And Emil knew he wasn't enough of a talking man to ever explain to them how it was that a bag of makings, a few meals, and a little human consideration had brought this all to pass.

He couldn't, for the life of him, explain it so that it would make sense. But he understood. And he held no rancor for the condemnation these men had been ready to lay upon him.

But he did blow up when both Watkins and Hard John Hosking came out with offers of good jobs for the kid.

"You go to hell, both of you!" Emil flared. "Go tame your own wolves. This'n is mine!"

CARMODY'S HOT-LEAD

By Robert E. Mahaffay

Tim Carmody's storekeeper dad used to say, "It takes courage to build up towns in the wilderness, an' courage to fight the mountains for gold — but the fellers that sell grub to the buckskin boys have to assay as high as anybody else in fightin' guts!" But young Tim, doubting that wisdom, must learn his own lesson in his own grim, hard-fought way.

CHAPTER ONE

Dead Men Load the Wagons

FROM beyond the rise came the churning uproar of running water and the rattle of wagon tires on rock. This trail crawling through rugged mountains into the heart of the Idaho goldfields had as bad a name as a trail could get, and big Tim Carmody eased his revolver in its holster. He did it with the smooth, off-hand gesture of a man who has used a .44 more than a little.

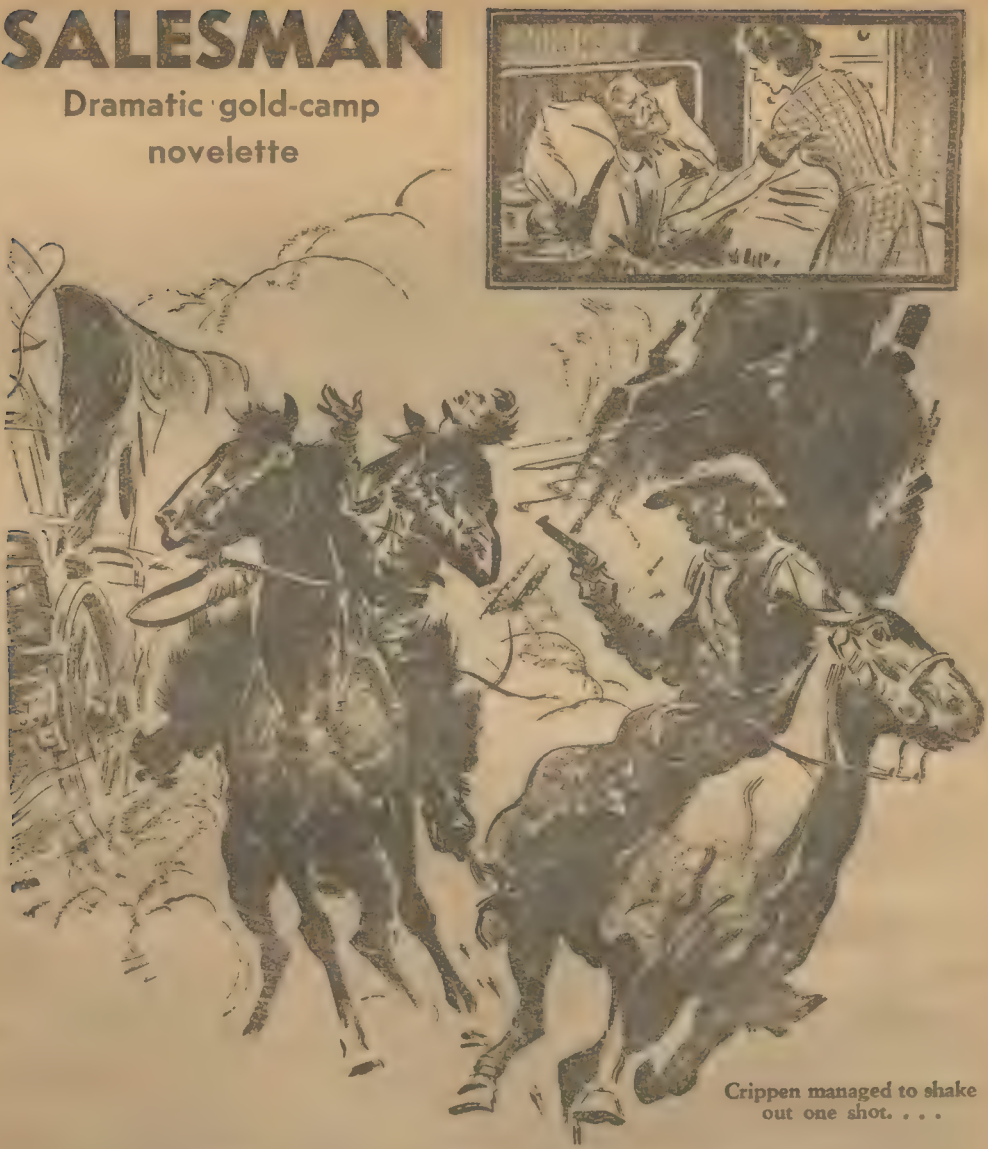
He kneed the long-legged buckskin up the slope and then pulled in, studying the scene below. He was young, in the neighborhood of twenty, and because his size wasn't linked with arrogance or bluster, an observer was inclined to underestimate it.

Looking down at the two wagons preparing to cross the ford, a touch of scorn pulled at his lips. An old rebellion, restless and defiant, grew in his eyes.

The wagons were innocent enough. Their frayed canvas tops were beaten a

SALESMAN

Dramatic gold-camp novelette



Crippen managed to shake out one shot. . . .

dirty gray by weather, their sides were warped and cracked but still holding stoutly together.

Along the sides in faded lettering were the words: "Tomlinson's General Store."

The old man with a worried expression who had stepped down to scan the river crossing was probably Tomlinson. He wore no hat; his gray hair was as thin and wispy as his stoop-shouldered frame.

He was a fool, Tim Carmody reflected. Only a fool or a fighter would venture into the lawless reaches of these Idaho Mountains.

Tim Carmody wondered what brand of madness urged such men into the savagery of frontier outposts. He wouldn't admit it, but he knew.

There had been a Carmody in Kentucky when it was a wilderness. A Carmody had sold Kit Carson trade goods at Taos. Still later, another Carmody, his father, had trekked to California in the early days of that fabulous rush.

Now he was here, and according to report the Idaho goldfields were worse than the lot of the others thrown together. But young Tim Carmody, last of his line, wasn't a storekeeper. He had a man to

find, and a fighter's reason for finding him.

Tomlinson appeared willing to risk the crossing. He climbed back up to his seat, touched up the four mules with his whip. The tandem-hitched wagons lurched into the water.

The flow was swift and broken by black rocks against which the water boiled white. Maybe the ford was belly-deep on a horse in the middle, Carmody estimated; maybe more. The outfit would require handling, but it could be done.

The wagons rolled on, the current pounded at the wheels, throwing up spray. The mules were scrambling a little on rocky footing, and there was danger of their being edged down out of the shallows.

Then Carmody swore. The old man stood to lose his outfit. He pushed the buckskin down the slope and into the river.

Tomlinson was nearly halfway across, and in trouble. A shack-sized boulder split the line he had taken. He lacked the strength or firmness to hold the mules above it, and as a last resort elected to circle below.

Carmody's roared warning was lost in the hissing racket of the river which was whipping now against the bottom of the wagon boxes.

A steady hand might still have pulled the mules out of it, but the leader on the near side stumbled in a hole and went down. It was touch and go in an instant. The mule was up, but in the scramble he had tangled a foot in the harness.

He lunged wildly, throwing the others into confusion. The wagons jerked, skidded downstream, with Tomlinson sawing desperately at the reins. Foot by foot the outfit was being forced down.

Coming up as fast as he could, Carmody got a glimpse of the old man's white, scared face. Yet Tomlinson had nerve enough. He looped his lines over the brake handle and sprang down into the hard-hitting current, fighting toward the trapped mule.

How he made it in that thrashing water Carmody never knew, but he did. The wispy old man got to the lunging mules, took a long breath and went under water. There wasn't any other way. That mule had to be freed or the rig was doomed.

He didn't comeup. The foaming and muddy current churned over the spot.

Tim Carmody stood up in his saddle and dove for the place. The river slugged him with solid, freezing punches. He was cursing himself and the old man as he did it. Then his groping hands encountered something yielding.

He staggered upright with Tomlinson, fought to the buckskin and flung the limp body across the saddle.

"To hell with the wagons," he thought. "They're gone." He was still cursing himself when he went back. It wasn't to save a foolish old storekeeper's stock, he told himself. He didn't give a damn about that. It was the mules.

He went down again, took his chances with the current which strove to hurl him under thrashing hoofs. He spread the loop in the trace chain, got the mule's leg out of it. It was his hand on the near leader's bridle, and his steadying voice, which pulled the outfit past the rock and on into shallow water.

The buckskin followed the wagons. The old man had almost slid back into the river when Carmody reached him to lift him down.

Though unconscious, Tomlinson was still breathing. Above his left ear the scalp was laid open to the bone where a shod hoof had slashed him. Carmody shrugged. Either there was a concussion, or there wasn't. The only thing he could do was to stop the bleeding.

The first thing he did after that was to break his gun and wipe it dry. While he was lighting a fire to dry out his clothes, Tomlinson's eyes fluttered open.

The old man whispered, "Tell June. Tell—June—I—" That was all.

He drifted off again into unconsciousness. Carmody growled and went to look at the wagons. They were jammed with canned goods, clothes, flour and bacon; supplies of every description.

This was a haul worth having. It must have cost eight or ten thousand, and God knew what it would bring if it could be got to the camps. And old Tomlinson had thought he could get it up there alone—or keep it after he got there!

NO MAN'S life in these mountains was worth much, for gangs of plunderers had moved in on the country. Prospectors were shot for their dust, stages looted, the roads watched. Murder was as easy as getting a drink of whiskey. Killers caught red-handed were set free by miners' courts which would have paid with their lives for a guilty verdict.

Storekeepers were fools!

With the cold warmed out of his bones Tim Carmody made the old man as comfortable as he could in the back of the first wagon. Attempting to get him back to Lewiston was out of the question. There might or might not be a doctor in High Placer, the nearest camp. All Tim Carmody could do was try. He could take the wagons—

He was knotting the buckskin's reins to the tailgate of the second wagon when the notion hit him. He stood there with the leather in his hands, and his mouth twisted in a fighter's grin.

He squinted at the wagons. He had hated what they represented once, hated it enough to run away from it. He still did. It was the rebellion those things had stirred in him which had driven him along reckless, hot-headed trails, which had hardened him.

But this chance had dropped into his lap. He could go into High Placer as a storekeeper! There was irony in that, but also a certain harsh justice. There would be no better way of finding what he was after. Big Tim Carmody grinned again.

The decision made, Carmody stripped the gear from the buckskin, sent it with a slap back across the river. It was a wrench, but he cached his saddle in a rocky gash beside the trail. His gun belt he weighed in his hand, at last stowing it away among the merchandise. The gun he slipped into a coat pocket. He got up onto the seat of the first wagon, let his whip run out over the mules.

In about three hours, he figured, he would be in High Placer. He lounged on the hard seat, scanning the broken snow-draped peaks ahead. It was tough country—country that didn't allow the hard glint in Tim Carmody's eyes to relax.

He was an hour on his way when he found that he wasn't going to get to High Placer without trouble.

THE glint of sunlight on metal showed him the watcher in a rocky cleft ahead. The watcher slid backward out of the rocks as he came on, and presently two riders came cantering forward.

Tim Carmody remained slouched where he was. He looked lazy and not very fast, and he wanted it to ride that way.

Both the strangers were bearded. The man in the lead was strong-shouldered, with eyes dark and keen under a wide-brimmed hat.

If you like this story of the seething conflict of a raw gold-camp, you'll also want to read about that unforgettable six-gun padre, Friar Robusto, in Harry F. Olmsted's novelette of the roaring days along the gold frontier—"Friar Robusto's Gold-Camp Pilgrimage." Reserve your copy of the April issue now—on sale February 28th!

At his gruff greeting Tim Carmody pulled in his mules and wiped sweat from his forehead. "Howdy. Trail get better between here an' High Placer?"

"Worse," said the man with the scar, and jerked a thumb at the wagons. "What's your load?"

Tim Carmody spoke slowly and amiably. "A little of just about everything, I reckon. I aim to set up a store in High Placer."

The scarred man shook his head. "That's one mighty bad camp."

"Feller in Lewiston told me that too," agreed Carmody. "I thought the sheriff headquartered there."

Sheriff Blorn did, the scarred man admitted. He launched into a further warning and some desultory talk. His name was Crippen, he said. He and his partner, Griggs, were deputy sheriffs.

The partner had nothing to say.

During his talk, Crippen's dark eyes were appraising the outfit and examining Tim Carmody for weapons. There was a rifle thrust into a scabbard at the side of

the seat, but it was awkward to get at.

He said abruptly, "What you may as well know, Carmody, is that the job of keepin' the law here is to big for the sheriff—or the money he gets."

TIM CARMODY pulled a stubby black pipe from the breast pocket of his coat, reached slowly for the tobacco in his side pocket.

"So it's like this," Crippen continued. "Blorn pays the extra deputies he needs out of his own pocket. An' to see he don't lose by it, folks who git the benefit of the law's protection chip in."

"Good idea," Carmody admitted. "For fellers that figger they need help."

"You will," said Crippen grimly. "Tryin' to run a store—"

"Hold on a minute," Carmody broke in mildly. "How much of my money are you after?"

Crippen looked meaningfully at the wagons. "You've got plenty sunk in your stock, I'd say. Make it five hundred dollars."

"Five hundred?" Carmody shrugged. "I'll talk it over with the sheriff when I get there."

Crippen leaned forward in the saddle. His dark eyes were hard and bright now.

"The sheriff don't like to talk about it," said Crippen. "You'll pay now."

Tim Carmody's voice was soft. "Maybe you didn't get what I meant. I was goin' to tell the sheriff to go to hell."

Crippen stared, anger pouring into his eyes. It was Griggs who moved first. He drove a hand down to his holstered gun, began to snake it up. There was the crash of a shot, but it wasn't Griggs'.

Tim Carmody hadn't moved. He was still slouched a little, a hand in the side pocket of his coat where it had presumably gone after tobacco.

There was a hole in the pocket now, and gunsmoke was spurting out of it. Griggs went backward out of his saddle, his forehead crushed.

Crippen had already begun his move, which contempt had delayed. He saw what was happening, but it was too late to stop, and he flung his hand desperately for his gun. The one shot he managed to shake out went wild because two of Tim Carmody's bullets struck him.

Tim Carmody steadied the teams before he climbed down and examined the two dead men. He scrubbed for a moment at his jaw before he decided to load them into the second wagon.

"Sheriff'd like to see 'em—mebbe," he told himself. "An' I'd shore like to see this sheriff whose help comes so high."

He wondered, as the wagons began to roll again, if Sheriff Blorn had red hair. . . .

CHAPTER TWO

Afraid—or Crooked!

HIGH PLACER was a straggle of shacks rooted precariously on the north flank of Wolf River.

The camp's single, meandering street was deserted. Carmody clucked to his mules. The wagons lurched and groaned over the wretched trail.

It was the unfamiliar racket of the outfit, it seemed, which finally pulled a man out of one of the shacks which a hand-lettered board proclaimed to be a saloon.

That man, however, was followed by others. They poured through the swinging doors, knotting up in the street, and had no more than a brief and disinterested glance to spare for Carmody.

Tim Carmody pulled in his mules.

A slender man with buck teeth growled angrily, "What kind of evidence does it take to convict, anyhow? They had him dead to rights!"

A companion snapped, "Shut up, you damn fool!"

"Sure!" replied the slender one scornfully. "Like the witnesses done! Three men saw Jannings beef Dan McLeod. Comes to a trial, an' they all turn out to be blind! And the jury tickled as hell because they're turin' a murderer loose!"

"But they won't be worryin' about bullets in their back! You—"

The speaker broke off as a tall, hawk-nosed man sauntered out of the saloon.

There was a subtle shifting among the onlookers, and the buck-toothed man was by himself in the street. His voice was unsteady with anger as he said, "You snake-wiggled out of that one, Jannings!"

The fellow with the hawk nose,—

Jannings, eyed him with cool amusement. "Bechtol, you run more to tongue than to brains. If you figger you've got somethin' to square, shake your gun."

"Not here," Bechtol snapped. "Your pals would have buzzard lead in my back too quick. Keep 'em with you, Jannings—because the first time you go off alone, I aim to be there!"

Jannings shrugged and turned away. The crowd began to break up.

Tim Carmody said mildly, "Any of you gents happen to be Sheriff Blorn?"

Belated attention switched to him at once. A heavy-set man in his late forties, paunchy and flushed of face, wheeled toward him. "I'm Blorn. Who're you?"

Tim Carmody jerked a thumb at the lettering on the wagons. "You can read, can't you?"

Blorn scowled. He appeared upset and angry. "Well?" he snapped.

"I ran into some trouble down the road a ways," Tim offered apologetically.

"What the hell did you expect when you started up here?"

Tim Carmody scraped reflectively at his jaw. "Doggoned if I know, exactly. But these two fellers—"

"What two fellers?"

"Cripes, I never seen 'em before. I brought 'em along, though, for you to look at."

Tim Carmody swung down and went to the second wagon. The bodies of Griggs and Crippen he dumped without ceremony into the street.

BLORN stared, eyes bulging under bushy brows. "Damn it, Tomlinson," he exploded. "Crippen was a deputy of mine! Talk fast. Did you kill him?"

"Maybe," Tim said. "I wasn't alone, an' we were all shootin'." He held the black pipe in his left hand; his right was in his coat pocket. "Which reminds me. My pardner is bunged up pretty bad. If there's a doctor—"

"There ain't a sawbone inside of seventy-five miles," Blorn roared. "An' I asked you—who killed Crippen!"

Carmody shook his head. "I told you there was at a lot of shootin'. Just who shot who, I wouldn't want to say. Point is, your deputy got what he had comin'."

"It'll take more'n your word to settle that!"

Carmody eyed him mildly. "Whose word you goin' to take? Crippen's? He stopped us this side of the river. Claimed he was collectin' rake-off money for you."

Blorn said stormily, "That's a lie!"

There was an audible sound as Carmody cocked the gun in his pocket. "Which?" he wanted to know. "My story, or Crippen's?"

Blorn looked at the pocket and the powder-burned hole already in it. His face abruptly purpled.

"Don't threaten me, damn you! I told you Crippen wore a law-badge—"

Whatever else he had to say was checked by a curt remark from a man who had stepped into the doorway of the saloon. He was wide-shouldered, unbearded, with a shock of curly black hair.

"Don't make a jackass of yourself, Blorn," he advised. "Can't you tell a straight story when you hear one?"

The sheriff swung around. "Damn it, Toreen, he's sayin' that Crippen—"

"—was a crook. Sure. If he wasn't, what was he doin' paired up with Jack Griggs? If Griggs was in on it, it was a

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raw deal. You know that as well as I do!"

Scowling, Blorn said nothing.

"Maybe I'm stickin' my neck out," Toreen continued, "but I'd say this boy deserves a vote of thanks. There's been a rotten link in your law set-up, or you'd have had better luck than you've had. Crippen was it."

Blorn was still angry. "Let it ride that way, then," he said gruffly. He would have moved on, but Tim Carmody's drawling inquiry stopped him.

"Ever been in California, Sheriff?"

"What is it to you?"

"Just curious," Carmody was studying what he could see of Blorn's hair beneath his hatbrim. It was more of a straw color than it was red, but there was a suggestion of red in it.

"I've been a hell of a lot of places," Sheriff Blorn said grimly, and walked away.

Carmody lifted his eyes soberly to Toreen. "'Less I peddle my stuff out of the wagons I got to have a store. Anything you can recommend?"

Toreen pointed across the street. "Right behind you. A feller thought this camp could support two saloons. Maybe it can, only he didn't live long enough to find out."

THE two bodies were removed from the street. Carmody went to examine the rickety building. There were sleeping quarters at the back—a room like a closet with a broken cot in it—and it was there he carried Tomlinson.

The old man had not regained consciousness. It was likely, Tim reflected, that he never would. He repaired the cot, made Tomlinson as comfortable as he could.

He unhitched the mules, took them out back and hobbled them, then went to work unloading the wagons. Two hours of that and he stopped, and not because he was tired.

The sight of that miscellaneous collection of goods, the feel of them and the smell of them stirred up old memories in him. He had hated the touch of them before, and he hated it now. He got out his pipe and chewed hard on it, like a bronc trying to spit out a bit.

He couldn't help remembering his father, old Timothy. He remembered his steady, faded eyes behind their silver-rimmed spectacles, his gray beard, and his slow manner of talking.

It hadn't bothered him any to be called a damned flour-sifter or a canned-bean peddler.

"Well, I dunno," he'd say. "Country ain't rightly settled till a man can come into it an' do business. If he keeps gettin' shot at an' threatened an' his stuff stole, then he's in a hell of a bad spot. If somebody else don't fix it, why, he's got to."

IT HADN'T bothered him, either, to have men pulling fortunes out of the creeks around him. "Huntin' gold is all right," old Timothy would say. "There's plenty fellers won't do nothin' else. Only somebody's got to see they git grub an' stuff when they want it. There's Carmodys been doin' that for a long time. They had their troubles, but they always wound up still doin' it."

Timothy had gone down clinging to that creed. There had been gang-work in California too. They had tried to scare old Timothy and he wouldn't scare.

The story was still told of how he had walked up to a revolver muzzle with a bottle of vinegar in each hand. A red-headed man had ruled the play, and with the jagged end of one of the bottles, Timothy had marked him before the revolver had smashed out his life. That had broken Red-Head's game, and he had fled California.

And young Tim Carmody, goldfield hard-case who had learned to handle a gun, had returned, but too late.

He had had a bitter time of it standing in the deserted, empty store, thinking that if he hadn't run away old Timothy might still be alive He had wanted to square that somehow, and there was only one way, he figured, to do it. If he followed the red-head and paid off that debt, maybe Timothy would understand that he cared, even though during old Timothy's lifetime he hadn't seemed to.

With an angry shrug Tim Carmody stood up. He had spent a long time picking up the trail, but he was close now to the end of it. Strangely enough, it

had thrown him right into the middle of the thing he hated most!

Tim swore softly. He didn't care what happened to old Tomlinson or his store. They were bait, to be used as he needed them and discarded when he was through.

He brought in the rest of the goods, stacking them haphazardly. It was dusk before he finished, and as he straightened above the last packing box he saw the slim figure of a boy standing in the dim doorway.

"Nothing doing, bub," he said. "I won't have my stuff unpacked till tomorrow."

The boy didn't move, and Tim looked up again, sharply. It was then that he saw the revolver in the boy's fist, cocked and leveled at his, Tim Carmody's, midriff.

"It isn't your stuff," the youngster said, in a curious husky voice, "any more than your name's Tomlinson!"

CHAPTER THREE

Trap for a Traitor

TIM CARMODY took a long breath, weighing what Sheriff Blorn could make of this. It would be just about what Blorn wanted. He said, "Put that cannon down, bub, and we'll talk it over,"

The gun was trembling a little, but not enough to invite rashness. "Don't move," the kid said. He came in, closing the door with his heel. "Stay where you are!" His voice broke, rising shrilly. "If you've killed him, I'll—I'll—"

Tim Carmody's jaw went hard. In another instant the boy's hysteria would drive him to gun-play.

Before Carmody could move, another voice drifted across the gloom-shrouded room. It was feeble and cracked, and it came from the cubbyhole at the rear:

"June! That you, June? I'm here—"

The gun clattered to the floor. In a flash the youngster was past Carmody and into the bedroom where Tomlinson lay on his cot.

Carmody didn't look at them, but he could hear their voices. Swearing softly, he rummaged about until he found a lamp and a can of coal oil. He felt like a fool, and that angered him. He wanted nothing to do with this old man and his daughter. They didn't belong here; they were helpless, at the mercy of savage forces which, clearly would destroy them.

He heard the boy's voice again, and he recognized it this time for a woman's. "I'm sorry. Dad tells me you saved his life."

In the lamplight, now that he knew, Tim Carmody could see her woman's shape. She was older than he would have guessed, and in her dark eyes was a strangely stirring quality. He couldn't help but imagine that, pulled from beneath the shapeless man's hat, with her throat free of the rough jumper collar, her face would be beautiful.

"I just happened to be there," Carmody told her indifferently.

"It was more than that, Dad says. He wants to talk to you."

Tim Carmody was acutely uncomfortable standing in that cramped little room, looking down at the frail old man on the cot. He was struck by the bitter thought that Timothy, dying, must have looked like that. Helpless and desperately hurt, yet with such an indomitable gleam in his faded eyes.

"Ain't had a chance—to thank you, son," Tomlinson whispered. "Don't even know your name."

"It's Carmody."

"Carmody? That's a good name. Storekeeper blood in 'em—an' that's good blood. There was a Carmody I heard about in California. Maybe—"

"There's lots of Carmodys," said Tim harshly. He felt the past reaching out for him, knew that he must ruthlessly beat it back. "Look," he said. "This camp is no place for either of you. Get out."

He saw color come into the girl's cheeks; the old man's pale lips stiffened.

"I can't do that," Tomlinson whispered, "I came here to set up store. I still aim to."

"You wouldn't last a week!" Carmody snapped.

Tomlinson chuckled. "We got lastin' powers, me an' June. Anyhow, we couldn't go back if we wanted to. That's what June stayed behind in Lewiston for

(Continued on page 100)

IN THE SADDLE

LONG ago we said to our authors: "If you want to write our stories, they've got to be exciting, and they've got to be as much a part and parcel of the Old West as you know how to make them. That's taken for granted. But above all, they must deal with typical men and women who lived in those stirring pioneer times. Make your fiction characters out of flesh-and-blood besides ink—make 'em honest-to-God real Western frontier folks!"

Looking back, we think that they've succeeded pretty well. For it isn't unusual for us to get letters from readers who believe they have really known the purely fictional characters who appear in our stories. And others write in for information regarding the actual men whose names have made frontier history, and who have, from time to time, been portrayed by our authors.

Here is one such letter, and we pass it along, because we believe it holds general interest:

Editor, *Dime Western*
Sir:

I recall reading in a recent issue of your magazine a story by Dane Gregory in which he mentioned the possible end of the famous Tombstone outlaw and killer, Curly Bill Broccius. That set me thinking that the many times I've read of the wild days of Tombstone, and of its famous gunmen, I've never been able to find out what happened to the famous Earp Brothers, or to Doc Holliday.

If you can let me know if any of the above mentioned men are still alive, or where and how they happened to meet their deaths, I'll be obliged.

George Treadwell, Elyria, Ohio

We sent Mr. Treadwell's letter to George C. Bolds, who was a friend of both Wyatt Earp and Bill Tilghman. Here's his reply:

This is what Wyatt Earp told me personally in Santa Fe, some fifty years ago, concerning Bill Broccius:

"The day that Sheriff Behan came up to the Oriental Saloon with a large posse, with warrants for Doc Holliday's and my arrest after I avenged the death of my brother Morgan by killing Frank Stillwell, I had another man, Indian Charley, to find. He had also been in on killing Morgan. I told Behan that I would kill every one of the men who were implicated in Morgan's murder when I could find them. And I offered to fight him there.

"Behan seemed paralyzed with fear, and we rode out. I located Indian Charley and killed him.

"When Curly Bill and his outlaws ambushed us, we were within thirty feet of the cutbank before Bill and his men opened up on us. I saw Curly Bill, and taking good aim, I pulled both triggers of my shotgun. I sent eighteen buckshot into Curly Bill's body at a distance of thirty feet. I saw him throw up his hands as he collapsed. I knew I killed him, for it was impossible to miss at that distance. My clothes were shot to rags, but I never received a scratch."

As to their various ends: The reckless Doc Holliday died, I think, at Colorado Springs some fifteen years after he and the Earps left Tombstone. He died in bed with his boots off.

When he knew his time had come, he sent for Wyatt and said, "I always thought I would pass out at the end of a six-shooter, but the deal didn't come up that way. I never killed a man that did not need killing.

"I want you, as my last request, to take that old tin sign out of my trunk. It used to hang in front of my office in Dallas. Nail it to a post at the head of my grave." Wyatt did so; the sign read, "Doctor J. D. Holiday, Dentist".

Wyatt Earp spent some time in Denver and Gunnison. He ran a saloon in the Klondike during the gold rush. Later he went to Goldfield and other towns that sprang up overnight during the gold stampedes. During the last part of his life, he discarded his guns and was trying to forget the past. He owned some gold mining properties and some oil wells. He spent most of his time in his late years in Vidal and Los Angeles. Yet, with all the gunbattles he had been in, he died in a bed with clean sheets on, during the early 1920's.

Virgil Earp was Chief of Police at Colton, Colorado and died later in Goldfield. James Earp held a position with the Western Cattlemen's Association for a long time, and died in Los Angeles. Warren Earp was in business in California. He went on a trip to Wilcox, Arizona and was killed in a gambling joint. Thus passed a family that will never be forgotten in the Old West.

George C. Bolds

From what we have read of him, we agree that Wyatt Earp was typical of the frontier—one who did as much for the law and justice through the sheer fearlessness and force of his personality, as he did by increasing the population of Boothill.

We believe that in the next issue will be found fictional characters as colorful, as vital, and as interesting as were any of the actual men who

(Continued on page 98)

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**S. E. A., Kansas City, Mo.*

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**B. F., Bronx, N. Y.*

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**W. H. S., Alabama.*

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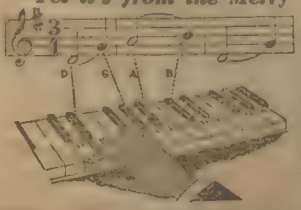
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(Continued from page 96)

rode the range or risked their lives on the dusty streets of untamed towns.

For example, Ray Nafziger's novel deals with young Chan Gorman—a youngster who had been raised among the tough-handed cowmen of the Kit Carson Mountains, then adopted by Big Brad Bayliss who only wanted him as man-of-all-work—without pay. For nine long years, this youngster had been bullied and abused, until one day Chan saw the heavy-set man whipping another boy, as he had so often brutally beaten Chan in the past. Chan took the kid's part, only to tangle in a violent duel with Bayliss.

"So you're looking for showdown?" rasped Big Brad at Chan. "We victualled and clothed you here in the valley, because you were the brat son of my wife's sister, and this is the return we git! Your paw was a no-good mountain cowboy that hoped to feather hisself a soft nest by marryin' a girl due to inherit a farm. Your paw figgered he was too good to do any work that couldn't be done from the saddle. And you're his kind—the loafin' son of a no-good mountain cowboy!"

He rushed toward Chan, his big fists flailing.

Chan dodged, pummelling the heavier man with rapierlike blows of his fists, until angered at the youngster's dodging, Big Brad closed his sinewy arms about Chan, intending to break his back.

Chan could have brought up a knee to break the hold, but instead he tore an arm free and knifed a blow down on the back of Bayliss' bull-like neck as one would kill a jackrabbit. Big Brad went down, and as he lay there a moment, his clawing fingers found and closed about the handle of a pitchfork, half concealed in the loose hay.

Suddenly he came to his knees, and then to his feet, gripping the fork in both hands. "Got you now!" he exulted. "Goin' to kill you!"

A pitchfork is a dangerous, a deadly weapon. The sharpened tines of smooth, bright steel can be as ugly a weapon as a bayonet. Chan Gorman saw death gleaming in those steel points, but he wasn't running from Big Brad. His eye caught sight of another fork stuck in the side of the haystack. He stepped back and whipped it out. Glaring, Big Brad growled, then lunged in. . . .

That is the opening of one of the most tensely dramatic novels we have read in a long time. In it one may meet those reckless men who lived out their lives according to their own grim rules of justice. Set against the starkly picturesque background of the high peaks of that rough cattle country, this story brings to life the full rich flavor of high adventure that was found only on that colorful frontier.

Cliff Farrell writes a powerful novelette of cattlemen's bullet-feud; Dee Linford also appears with another salty long story of the eternal conflict fanned to flame by sheep and cows—and in addition, there'll be other strong stories of the men who fought and rode to gunsmoke immortality.

The next issue—dated April—is published February 28th!

(Concluded from page 41)

Duryea came to know why the men, like those in Blackjack's Trailtown Saloon held Buckskin Frank Lawler in such high esteem. He knew how to handle things when they came up. He didn't debate, he acted.

AT DODGE, with the cattle in the pens, and five hundred dollars of bonus in his hand, Jim sought out Buckskin Frank. He said, "I don't understand why you pulled me out of the hole. You could have smashed me for all time."

"Some things come before personal grudges," said Buckskin.

"Why did you even come along?" went on Jim. "You must have known you'd get the pushing of your life under me. You must have taken on too much red-eye—"

"I was broke," confessed the oldster. "And I never drink more than one glass in any one day. That Mississippi River deal busted me out of my ranch and all my holdings. I needed the forty a month and beans, no matter how hard it was going to come."

"But you could have had command instead of—"

"Could have, yes. When you told me about the water, I figured I had another debt to pay. I know what it means to be busted out. Well, I won't be again. I'm taking five hundred head on to Montana for a fella. I hear there's good grazing land to be had for the staking."

Jim stared straight ahead for a moment. Then he said slowly, humbly: "I'd like to ride north with you."

Buckskin nodded. "I need a good man to make into a foreman," he said.

Jim looked at the money in his hand. "Maybe there's room for a couple of fellas that would go partners."

"Maybe."

"Half of this bonus is yours," said Jim. "You earned it. We could buy a few head of our own and take 'em along."

Buckskin Frank Lawler thrust out his hand and Jim took it. "Maybe we could buy some of the Lazy S stock," grinned Buckskin. "You brought 'em in pretty prime!"

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(Continued from page 95)

—to sell off everything we couldn't bring up here."

The old man closed his eyes for a moment. "I'll be able to pay you," he said haltingly. "I figured maybe you'd give me an' June a hand, till—"

The words were like prison walls to Tim Carmody. "I'll help you get out of here," he said. "That, and nothing more!"

HE WENT out of the room without looking at the girl. He wanted a drink or a fight—anything that would get him out of this place haunted by the past.

He stood in the darkened street, looking up and down for a moment, then went across and into the saloon.

It was a rough place with a plank bar and half dozen rudely-constructed tables. The single room was smoky, and the smell of whiskey strong. The hawk-nosed Jannings sat at one of the tables with four miners, engaged in a listless game of stud. Over in a corner, half hidden by tattered newspaper, was the slender man with the buck teeth, Bechtol.

Carmody stepped to the bar, and Toreen pushed out bottle and glass. When he attempted to pay, Toreen shook his head. "Not tonight, mister. That job you did on Crippen an' Griggs earns you free likker."

Tim Carmody shrugged. "Luck."

Toreen was leaning casually on the bar, his big shoulders hunched forward a little. There was something impressive about the man's shock of black hair and the strong mold of his face. He had shaved since Tim's arrival.

"Nobody with just luck could kill a pair of gun-hands like Griggs and Crippen." Toreen's voice was low. "This country needs men like you, Tomlinson. If you hadn't come here, I've have gone over after you."

The error of the name Tim wasn't yet ready to correct, and he refused to lift his eyes lest they betray it.

"No need to tell you," said the saloonman, "what a devil's mess these hills are in. There's a gang gutting this country. A gang one man can't buck."

"One man runs the gang," Tim said.

"Yeah. One man—but with twenty

trigger-fingers behind him!" growled Toreen. "Some of us—not twenty, but some—figger the law's the law, even if it takes Vigilantes to make it stick!"

THE fighting quality showed in Tim Carmody's jaw as he set his glass down. He understood the offer being made him, and that much depended on his answer.

"It's been done before," he said. "There's times when no other way is worth a damn."

A man at the other end of the bar rattled his glass. Toreen went down to him. When he came back there was a gleam in his light blue eyes. He filled Carmody's glass and took a drink himself.

"Maybe," Toreen suggested, "you knew Blorn in California."

Tim could feel the boring pressure of the saloonkeeper's inspection. He said, "I've never seen him before in my life."

"But you might, maybe be looking for someone from California," Toreen persisted. "There's talk here that Blorn pulled out of there for a damned good reason."

Tim Carmody waited silently. He could feel the heat of old anger stirring in his blood.

"Maybe," Toreen was drawling, "it struck you as mighty queer Blorn's deputy could be crooked, without Blorn knowin' about it."

Tim Carmody looked up, his gray eyes steady. "You're sayin' that Blorn is the one man?"

"If I didn't know it, I wouldn't say it." Toreen's voice was dry and even. "We're tanglin' with Blorn tonight. Do you want to come in on it?"

Tim Carmody's trail had been a long one, and this was the end of it. That knowledge hammered his bitterness, his resentment, his hardness, into a single purpose.

"I don't want a part of what happens to Blorn," he said. "I want all of it!"

TOREEN moved his wide shoulders. "It can be fixed that way. There'll be work enough for everybody." He touched the bottle again, and Tim shook his head. "Up on Moose Creek there's

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"How soon?"

"Take a walk around an' then come back. I'll be here, or someone else will be. We can't all pull out together. Have you got a horse?"

Tim Carmody growled as he thought of the good buckskin he had turned back on the trail. "No."

"I'll dig one up for you." Toreen looked pleased. He ran broad fingers through his black hair. Something about the gesture fascinated and troubled Tim Carmody. "Let me get the lights out, and then come back," Toreen said.

Elation still goaded Carmody as he stepped out into the street. It was a thing demanding physical outlet, and he began to walk with a driving stride. He could head the heavy rumble of the river on his left. The stars were out, hanging bright and cold and still in the infinite depths of black sky.

He had come a long way to pay the debt he owed old Timothy. The payoff was in his hands. He thought of it as something tangible, something his sinewy fingers could wrench and break.

He came back along the darkened straggle of buildings. A light was still burning in the improvised store, but the saloon was dark.

He hadn't planned to stop. He had crowded the girl and her father out of his mind altogether. But June Tomlinson was standing in the doorway, and something about the glimpse he got of her face pulled him that way.

STEPPING inside and closing the door, he was aware instantly of her womanhood. It was a force subtle and strong which moved him, and which with an effort of will he rejected.

The light on her face clearly emphasized the curl of her lashes, the gentleness of her throat, the appeal of her dark eyes.

Carmody brought his mind away from

that. He said bluntly, "Decided, have you?"

She said, "Yes," very clearly. And then, "We're not leaving."

It was then he saw the fear she was struggling not to show. One of her hands was behind her. She was holding something in it, concealing it.

Carmody jerked his head. "What have you got there?"

"Nothing."

"Let me see it."

"It's nothing, I tell you."

Tim Carmody was still in the grip of his own emotions; he was unreasonably angered by her defiance; he had had an extra drink. He took one step, caught her wrist, pulled it to him, and took the slip of paper from her resisting fingers.

Those same fingers slapped hard at his cheek. The girl's voice was low and furious: "You're drunk!"

He didn't answer or move. His eyes were on the printed message the note bore. There was something deadly about its brusqueness:

> We want a thousand dollars. This time we'll get it. Have it ready.

"Have you got that much money?" he demanded. Her chin tilted up, and he knew that she had. "You'll have to pay it," he told her savagely. "Either that—or get out!"

She whispered, "What kind of man are you?"

"What can you do to stop them?" he flung back at her. "You, and a hurt old man—dyin', likely! You can't—"

"Dad's hurt, but he isn't a *coward!*"

The word was meant to sting, and it did. It lifted resentment and hard stubbornness in Tim Carmody. "I told you what I'd do for you," he blurted. "Take it or leave it!"

There was fibre to this girl that Tim Carmody could feel. It was a kind of unshakable courage that the softness of her lips and the warmth of her eyes concealed.

"Yes, you told us," she said. "A strong man—a gun-fighter—telling a girl and a weak old man what he would do for them. Telling them to whine for

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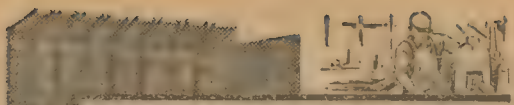

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scraps, or else run like whipped dogs!"

Fury blazed in her eyes now. "Well, we're not going to do it! We're not the kind of gun-carrying cowards that your gold-camps breed. We're storekeepers! We won't run and we won't be bullied and we'll fight if we have to! We don't need your kind to help us; we're afraid we'd catch the yellow streak you hard-cases think every man has. Now— get out!"

She was at the door, flinging it open. "Get out," she said again. "We don't want you."

Her eyes were wet! Tim Carmody could see that. There was sickness in him, but his pride and the bitter anger of whiskey were stronger.

He went out into the street. The door shut behind him with the snap of an exploding shell.

CHAPTER FOUR

Storekeeper Blood

TIM CARMODY stopped there, his breath coming hard as he cut grimly across toward the darkened saloon. Then, in the shadows, he heard the restless stamping of a pony. A voice murmured, "This way, Tomlinson."

It wasn't Toreen's voice, but that was all right. With his forearm Carmody brushed the bulk of the gun in his pocket. He made out a tall figure in the darkness, and the shapes of two horses.

Carmody took the reins and stepped up into the saddle. The stirrups were short, and he dropped them a notch. "How far is this place?"

Eight—ten miles, some of it steep goin'."

They drifted quietly out of the camp, up a sharp pitch on which the hoofs rang like hammers, and then into stunted timber. Carmody's tall guide rode at his left stirrup, hardly more than a head in the lead.

Tim Carmody strove to focus his attention on what lay before him. This was the pay-off he had promised; this was what he had waited for, fought for, dedicated his life to. The moment to come would square accounts for old Timothy.

For anguished months he had thrown into this pursuit all of his resolution, his courage, his strength. The debt he owed Timothy had been burned into him with the hot iron of remorse. That debt would only be paid when he had the red-haired murderer of Timothy in his gun-sights.

Tim Carmody waited for that thought to lift him and grip him. But strangely, the surge of high elation, which should have wiped out his other thoughts, didn't come.

They were still climbing, the hoofs rattling on loose rock. Black ridges enclosed them, seeming to tower inward, as if on the verge of roaring collapse.

The man at Carmody's side said, "You hear anythin'?"

"No."

"I thought I heard a bronc follerin us. I'll drop back a little an' see."

The guide fell behind. When he caught up again, he came up on Carmody's right side instead of the left, and he didn't pull ahead as he had before. That touched a chord in Carmody's gun-training, but it was a chord drowned almost instantly by the force of another thought. A bitter thought—the recognition of a fact that howled and slashed in his head.

Because the thing he had fought so savagely to achieve wasn't the thing that would pay his debt to old Timothy.

There was storekeeper blood in the Carmodys. Old Timothy had had the same kind of calm courage that June Tomlinson had shown, and that old Tomlinson had. Timothy couldn't be bullied, he couldn't be run out. Neither could they.

Timothy had died because he was that kind of man. Timothy had been helpless; so were they. Timothy hadn't quit or submitted; neither would the Tomlinsons.

Despite the cold, the sweat came out now on Carmody's forehead in scalding drops. There was only one way the debt could be paid.

Tim Carmody said hoarsely, "I'm goin' back." That was all.

And the man beside him said, "No. you're not goin' anywhere."

In the cool darkness there was the whisper of metal against smooth leather as a gun was drawn.

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THE tone of voice and the sound were things Tim Carmody had heard before. They cut like a knife through his emotion, because the instinct of self-preservation was bound up in them.

In that narrow fragment of time Tim Carmody was again the practised gun fighter. The voice, at long last, he recognized; it belonged to the hawk-nosed Jannings. Jannings had come up on his right side deliberately, planning this. And Jannings could block Carmody's draw, as he pulled and killed without hurry.

Only one possible move was right, and only a man who had fought before could unerringly select it in one flashing instant.

Tim Carmody made no effort to grapple or draw. He rolled down past his mount's left shoulder. The explosion of Jannings' gun blasted him on over.

The bullet hit Carmody glancingly in the side as he fell. His horse bolted, jumping on ahead. Falling, Carmody had stabbed automatically for his gun pocket, and he had the revolver in his hand when he hit. He lay on his side, not stirring. In the dead blackness he would be hard to locate.

He heard the shuffling of Jannings' pony. That stopped almost at once. In the quiet, whichever man moved first would likely die.

The stillness lasted, however, only long enough for that fact to be catalogued. A rider on the trail behind them had advanced from a muffling bed of pine needles onto rock. He was coming up recklessly at a sharp trot.

A voice lifted: "Start when you're ready Jannings!"

It was a voice Carmody remembered. It belonged to Bechtol, the slender man who had scorned the outcome of the false trial in High Placer and had promised Jannings a showdown.

Jannings was too shrewd to answer. He could afford to wait, to make his shot count because Bechtol was taking the risk. Bechtol—brave, reckless, or both—was gambling on getting in a shot at close quarters before he died. He was coming on steadily, not more than fifteen paces distant.

Carmody said evenly, "You're as good as dead, Jannings."

He got a spitting snarl of gunfire in reply. At once thunder broke and crashed in that narrow defile in the hills.

Jannings' slug churned dirt by Carmody's cheek. Carmody's gun slashed bullets to the right and left of the flash. Down-trail, Bechtol too was shooting.

FIVE seconds of turmoil, and then quiet again. Tim was certain he had heard a man plunge from saddle to ground; but which of the two it was, he couldn't tell.

"I think," he heard Bechtol say, "we done ourselves a job, Tomlinson."

The name's Carmody," Tim said. "Tomlinson was good for a while, but not now." He got up awkwardly, and the whipping pain in his side told him that he had broken bones there.

He could make out the shape of Bechtol, stepping down and bending over a huddled figure on the ground.

"Finished," Bechtol said. "I hope to hell it was my slug did it."

"It was," said Carmody, who knew better. "Now, friend, I need a horse. I need it now and I need it bad. I want yours."

Bechtol straightened suspiciously. "What for?"

Carmody said grimly, "The game was rigged for High Placer tonight. They bluffed me out of town, an' like a damn fool I fell for it. I want to get back in before it's over."

"It won't even start, Carmody. Not without Jannings. He was the High Mogul of the hell-raisers in this part of the country."

Carmody jerked out an oath. "He may have looked like it, but he wasn't. I'm not guessing—I know! Do I get the horse?"

Bechtol chuckled. "No. But I'll catch Jannings' pony for you. Shootin' don't trouble him much. He ain't far."

Bechtol was right. In a matter of less than three minutes he was back, handing a pair of reins to Carmody. Tim got up into the saddle, setting his jaw against the worrying bullet-wound in his side. The blood was cold and clammy by the time it got down to his boot top.

"Maybe," Bechtol suggested, "if

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there's somthin' to tell, you better spill it 'fore we get there."

"No time," Carmody snapped. "Get to that camp as fast as you can. What there is to see you'll see quick enough!"

Bechtol was a good man. He knew that trail, and he wasn't afraid to ride it. Carmody stuck behind him, guided sometimes by the flying shape of him ahead, but more often by the beat of hoofs.

The racket of their passage faded away soggily into pine thickets then roared high to roll and echo among naked canyons. Tim Carmody cursed himself for having left High Placer at all.

There were still four miles to cover, some of that distance so steep that the horses took it sliding on their haunches, some of it through shoulder high brush, all of it tortuous.

He would be late, Carmody kept telling himself; too late. He was convinced they had overshot their mark, when Bechtol yelled something over his shoulder.

Tim Carmody drove his bootheels home, pulled up abreast of Bechtol. They

Classified Advertising

(Continued)

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were on the rocky pitch that slid down into the camp. Muffled and faint over the sound of their own riding came a thudding crash. Gunfire!

CARMODY swore at the queer lightness in his head. He held his reloaded gun in his hand now, gripping it hard, afraid that if he relaxed he wouldn't again be able to force his fingers around it.

The saddle was queer or the horse was queer. One or the other was weaving from side to side, trying to make him fall, and he had to concentrate on not falling because he had riding, and a lot of it, still to do.

Bechtol was shouting at him. The sheep-headed idiot! Why didn't he just ride?

A beam of light whisked out into Tim Carmody's eyes. It came through a doorway that he wouldn't have recognized because it was smashed and broken.

What he did recognize was the stack of boxes and sacks which had evidently been piled as a barricade behind the door.

Tim Carmody put his horse back on it haunches in a smother of dust just beyond that doorway. Maybe it was the bullet humming past his head that did it, but he was laughing.

It was good to be on solid ground, walking in, with a gun bucking in your fist.

There were two bodies lying in the street. There were three gun-hands—guards, he figured—who aimed to hold that street against all comers.

One of them was shooting it out with Bechtol. Carmody walked in, hunched over, toward the other two. A bullet nipped his coat. He shot twice; without looking he saw the successive lances of flame. One of the two guards went down. Carmody shot again.

The third guard was unhit, but he had had enough. He turned and rabbited along the front of the store. Carmody heard Bechtol yelling and saw him running toward him.

Carmody stepped across the timber, scrambling a little as he kicked a way through the tangle of boxes. The laugh was still on his lips.

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It didn't change when he saw Toreen.

THERE were little trickles of blood running down the saloonman's smooth-shaven left cheek. Birdshot, Carmody guessed, from the puny shotgun lying across Tomlinson's cot which had been dragged into the front room. Carmody wondered where in hell that weapon had come from. Tomlinson was lying back on the blankets, his mouth open.

Toreen was trying to get back across the room to put out the lamp.

Tim Carmody said, "This way, Toreen!"

Toreen got his gun around and triggered, but there was already one of Tim Carmody's bullets in his head. . . .

Tim Carmody went down on his hands and knees into darkness. From far off he heard Bechtol's voice, and then he heard June Tomlinson calling. . . .

The darkness was a long time going away. It was exploding, Tim thought, into fire. The fire was in his throat; it was whiskey that Bechtol was forcing between his lips.

They didn't want him to get up, but he did. He was big Tim Carmody, and it took more than one bullet to keep a Carmody down. "We took 'em, Bechtol. We sure as hell took 'em!"

Bechtol had a bandage around his head, but he chuckled. "I kep' thinkin' we'd have to pitch into twenty of 'em. Toreen always said—"

"I reckon Toreen tallied his gunhawks two or three times—so folks'd be more apt to shy away." Carmody walked slowly and carefully to where Toreen lay. He knelt down and opened the man's coat and his shirt. What he was looking for was there.

It had been the hair which had tripped a trigger deep down in Tim Carmody's mind. Toreen's black hair was dull and lifeless, because it had been dyed. And the careful shaving. . . . His beard, of course, would be red. It didn't matter now, Tim thought. It was a small thing compared to what he had found.

HE GOT up and turned around. June was by his side, and he reached out to touch her shoulder. He said a little

haltingly, "Kid, that old man of yours has the right kind of nerve. Is he—"

She nodded. "He just fainted when the gun kicked him."

There were more people in the store now. Bechtol seemed to be speaking for them when he said, "Listen, Carmody. The sheriff—Blorn, you know—"

"I was goin' to ask you about him."

"He was square enough," Bechtol said quickly. "He just didn't know what to do. He tried to buck this game, an' they got him. He was one of the fellers lyn' out in the street."

Carmody nodded. Before he could speak, Bechtol said, "What I'm gettin' at, Carmody, is that we'll need a new sheriff, a man we can bank on. We kind of figgered——"

Grinning, Carmody shook his head. "If it's a lawman you're lookin' for, you fellers don't have to go any farther than Bechtol there. He's got the kind of fightin' guts it takes, an' the savvy. Me—hell, I'm just a storekeeper."

It made him feel good, somehow, to say that. He waved a hand around the wrecked store. "From now on," he said, "this outfit goes under the name of Tomlinson—Tomlinson and Carmody. An' maybe—maybe right soon—we'll be callin' it Tomlinson, Carmody and Carmody."

He was looking at June Tomlinson as he said it, and he wondered if the smile in her eyes could rightly be termed an acceptance.

THE END

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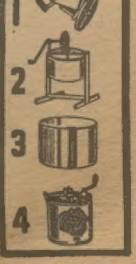

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